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THE CONTACT HAS BEGUN

The True Story of a
Journalist's Encounter
with Alien Beings

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Phillip H. Krapf



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*For the 80 percent.
You'll know who you are.*

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Preface

It was the end of another satisfying day in a rather routine life. I brushed my teeth and prepared to hop into bed at about 9 P.M. My wife was out of town for a few days, so the biggest decision facing me at the moment was which TV channel to watch before drifting off to sleep.

But even as I began to turn down the bed, I got a sudden urge to step out onto the bedroom balcony to gaze wondrously at the nearly full moon that lit up the night sky.

It was Tuesday, June 10, 1997, and as I stared at Earth's nearest neighbor, I found myself quietly contemplating my station in life. I had more or less retired four years earlier at the age of 58, when I had accepted a buyout offer from the *Los Angeles Times* after spending 25 years with that newspaper as a copy editor in the main newsroom in downtown L.A.

Even at 62, though, I didn't consider myself old. Fortunately, I had other interests outside of the newspaper business, and I managed to fill my time productively and stay busy. Oh, sure, there were periods of boredom, but overall I considered myself extremely fortunate. Life was good, and I was thankful.

My wife, Maria, and I live in a comfortable home in a suburban community in the northern part of Los Angeles County. Our beds are soft, the pantry is full, the lawn is green and well-trimmed, and our neighbors are congenial. My wife, a chiropractor who has been in practice in a nearby town since 1978, enjoys her work. And I take great pleasure in grabbing an occasional afternoon nap at just about the same hour that my former colleagues face stomach-churning deadlines as they wrestle with reporters' copy.

On this particular night, I heaved a sigh of contentment, stepped in off the balcony, and slipped into bed. Even as I was grappling with the mundane decision of what TV program to watch, momentous calculations that would have a profound effect on the future course of my life were being made in another place—250,000 miles away on the far side of the lovely moon that I had just been admiring.

Was it just coincidence, then, or had there been some strange and inexplicable force at work that had beckoned me out onto the balcony?

It's a question for which I do not have an answer—yet.

Chapter One

The Unthinkable Occurs

I awoke with a start and found the bedroom bathed in a bluish, iridescent light. At first, I thought that I had fallen asleep with the TV on. I groped for the remote control on the nightstand. The lighted dial on the bedside digital clock radio read 2:32 A.M. It was early Wednesday, June 11, 1997.

I turned to aim the remote at the TV set, but the screen was dark. A small, cold shiver of apprehension raced down my spine as I tried to identify and comprehend the source of the eerie light.

Since I consider myself an extremely rational person and am as devoid of superstitious beliefs as humanly possible, my racing mind was searching for a logical explanation. At the same time, the light slowly began to pulsate and shimmer, changing alternately to a slightly darker shade of blue and then brightening to a lighter shade of blue-white.

I reached for my glasses on the nightstand and then turned my attention to the bedroom window, thinking that perhaps the strange light was coming from there. But the drapes were tightly drawn. No, this light definitely had to be originating from inside the room, and I was more mystified than fearful.

I swung out of bed and headed for the doorway and the wall switch that controls the bedroom light. But I got no more than two or three steps before the pulsating bluish-white light, which had washed the room in a subdued floodlight fashion, suddenly

narrowed into a tightly concentrated spotlight beam. And it was focused directly on me!

Gravity seemed to take a holiday. I could feel no weight on my bare feet against the carpeted floor. My brain was still dealing with this when I suddenly began to rise like a pea being sucked up into a drinking straw. Only in this case, the "drinking straw" was the beam of light, and I was the "pea."

Under ordinary circumstances, I think that the normal human reaction would be to scream out in abject animal terror. But before my autonomic nervous system could even trigger such a response, I was overwhelmed by a sense of peace and tranquillity. I didn't have time to analyze it because the sensation of rising seemed to last no more than a second or two.

As I would learn later, the beam of light itself, the "drinking straw" in which I was firmly enclosed, caressed me as I traveled along its length, and actually triggered the calming effect that enveloped me.

Just as quickly as it had started, the journey ended. I don't think that more than two seconds had passed between the time the light first focused on me and the time that I found myself in a very large room facing the strangest creatures I had ever seen. Deep down, I suppose, I knew what had happened to me, but my psyche was still trying to deny it. There probably aren't many people who haven't heard or read about the tales of alien abductions that have been circulating on television shows, in magazines, and even in bestselling books for years. I didn't personally know anyone who believed the stories, although I was aware that there were vast numbers of people convinced of their authenticity. I was *not* one of them.

But no amount of denial was going to alter the fact that I had been abducted, I was on a spacecraft, and I was among extraterrestrials. There was no other explanation, except that I might be dreaming, but I knew that this was no dream—or nightmare. This was real. Every concept that I had held regarding so-called alien abductions went out the window. I thought at the time that no person had ever been as wrong about this subject as I had been. The stories that I had so cavalierly dismissed in the past as the delusions of troubled people were actually true, it appeared.

In the past, whenever I had given even passing attention to these tales, I thought that such an experience would not be survivable, that the human mind would simply snap at the shock and immediately plunge into an abyss of insanity.

The fact that I was completely at peace and devoid of any fear seemed to belie the reality. The strongest emotion I felt at the time, to be honest, was one of unbridled curiosity.

I was standing among a group of three alien beings, and I was still cloaked in the beam of light that apparently had transported me. But now I could see the source of the beam—a small disk, about three inches in diameter, that was attached to the ceiling on a swivel. At my side was what appeared to be a padded clinical table, similar to what one would find in a chiropractor's office or in an examination room in the typical American medical office.

The creatures themselves were very uniform in height, ranging from about five feet two inches to perhaps five feet four. They were quite slender by human standards and had dark eyes that shone out from slanted openings that were not much more than slits.

Their noses were very small, almost nonexistent, with two tiny black dots that appeared to be nostrils. Similarly, their mouths were not more than slits either, with thin lips that hardly had any definition. I saw no indication of teeth. The ears were slightly larger than human ones in proportion to their size, and they were somewhat pointed. They reminded me of the ears of the fictional Mr. Spock of the "Star Trek" TV series. I could discern no body hair.

There was an interesting range in the creatures' skin coloring—almost a multiracial element. But unlike the different races on Earth with their distinct facial characteristics—such as lip thickness and nose and eye shapes—their features were uniform. Skin color ranged from grayish-white with a barely perceptible greenish tint, to a muted tan with the same greenish tinge.

All of these beings wore flowing robelike garments in various pastel shades. I did not know at the time, of course, if this was their ordinary clothing or perhaps a uniform. It might have been professional garb, much like the surgical gowns worn by human

medical doctors at a hospital.

As I said, the room was large, rectangular in shape, and perhaps 600 feet by 400 feet, measuring about 20 feet from floor to ceiling. It was brilliantly lit and reminded me of a hospital ward, but the biggest one I had ever seen, with hundreds of tables identical to the one by which I stood.

The tables were neatly arranged in rows, spaced about 10 to 15 feet apart, stretching from wall to wall in all four directions. Above each table attached to the ceiling was a disk from which the beam of light that had enveloped me originated. Clustered around the tables were teams of three to five extraterrestrial (E.T.) creatures.

Although I could not see to the far reaches of the room, I noticed that the majority of the tables around me were occupied by very ordinary human beings. Most of them were reclining in various postures, some on their sides, and others in the prone and supine positions as the E.T.'s bent over them in what appeared to be close scrutiny.

A few, however, were standing beside the tables. At first, I assumed that, like me, they had just arrived.

I noticed that a couple of people—a black man (normally I would refer to him as an African American, but I had no way of knowing if he was an American, an African, a Jamaican or whatever) of about 25 or 30 and a Caucasian teenage girl—appeared to be engaged in quiet conversation with the aliens who clustered around them.

A muted noise filled the room. There was something about it that was at once slightly familiar, yet frustratingly just out of my grasp of identification. And, paradoxically, it was like nothing I had ever heard before. Then I seized upon it—the buzz of a large audience during intermission—conversation. But the sounds were totally beyond those of any foreign language I had ever heard. The E.T.'s standing around the tables were involved in hundreds of conversations as the teams studied their subjects.

The light that held me in its focus suddenly flickered and went out.

One of the three creatures in my cluster took a step toward me and said, "I am Gwantelmipsa."

At least that's what it sounded like to my ear. I have spelled it phonetically here, or as

close to it as I possibly can, but a case could be made for spelling it in a number of other variations, such as Guandalmepsa or Kwantalmipsa. The snippets of conversations that I caught from the E.T.'s at several nearby tables made me wonder if some of the sounds might even be beyond duplication by human vocal cords. *Transliteration, if it ever occurred, was certainly going to be interesting*, I thought.

If the E.T. who spoke to me was any indication, at least one of them seemed to be able to speak English. Maybe all of them could, for that matter. *If that turned out to be correct*, I thought, *they probably would be able to speak other Earth languages as well*. That initial assessment turned out to be absolutely true.

I stared dumbly at this being who had introduced himself to me, not quite knowing how to respond. He couldn't help but notice my discomfort.

"But you will call me Gus," he continued, pointing to a name tag on his robe below the right shoulder. Sure enough, the tag had "Gus" printed on it. Then I noticed that all of the extraterrestrials seemed to be wearing name tags. "I know it is impossible for you to address me by my true name, so I and all of my colleagues have taken names that are familiar to your tongue."

"Hello," I replied. "I'm Phil." I know it sounds absurd, but it was all I could muster at the moment. The appropriate response to meeting an extraterrestrial being had not been formalized in the book of etiquette yet, as far as I knew. The moment was beyond surreal.

Only minutes before, I was the consummate skeptic and cynic who would immediately label anyone who claimed to be abducted by space aliens as a certifiable nut case and a candidate for a rubber room. Yet, here I was, matter-of-factly, calmly, facing a being from another world and introducing myself in much the same way that I would present myself to someone I had just met at a cocktail party.

It occurred to me that my sensibilities, my consciousness, probably had been altered. Otherwise, how could I reconcile my actual demeanor with the uncontrolled reaction that, by all human standards, would be normal under such circumstances?

Why was I accepting this unbelievable, unimaginable scenario with such equanimity? Drugs administered surreptitiously? As a function of the light that had brought me aboard?

Intellectually, I knew that I should be experiencing nightmarish terror, yet I felt none. My mind should be in denial, threatening to push me over the brink of insanity, refusing to accept this reality so willingly, so calmly. After all, my whole belief system was being turned upside-down.

One minute I was peacefully asleep in my own bed, and the next I was on a spaceship—I assumed so, anyway. I couldn't imagine where else I could be—surrounded by alien beings.

I wasn't going to be missed for a while, because for one of the few times in more than 30 years of married life, I had been alone in my bed. My wife was spending a few nights with her elderly mother, who lives about three miles away and who had recently gone through some serious surgery.

Second, for the past few months I had been leaving on two- and three-day trips to roam small towns of California in search of a possible retirement site. I had just returned from one such excursion to Siskiyou County in the northernmost part of the state where I had explored the towns of Yreka, Etna, Fort Jones, Weed, and a few other quaint little places nestled against the backdrop of the imposing snow-capped Mt. Shasta.

I had told my wife, when she left for her mother's house, that I might take off to check out some towns in the Monterey Bay area, about 300 miles up the coast from Los Angeles. So she wouldn't give much thought to not finding me home if she happened to call or drop by. She might wonder why I hadn't left a note, which I usually did, but that wouldn't really arouse any suspicions on her part.

Deep in my bones I felt that I was not in danger. Besides, my curiosity was growing stronger by the moment, and I actually started getting excited about the exhilarating experiences that might await me (the effect of the drugs, or the light again?). Imagine how stimulating a tour of the ship would be. What would it be like to peer out of one of the several portholes that I saw to look down upon the blue Earth below?

However, I had no idea what our proximity to Earth was. Perhaps we were so far out into space that my home planet was not even visible. No matter. In that case, I would be content to gaze upon the galaxies blazing in glory against the blackness of the universe. This was an adventure of unparalleled proportions, and I was building a hunger to absorb every delicious, titillating morsel of it.

Maybe these creatures would grant me some of these privileges in exchange for my

cooperation. Of course, I was being naive. I had no bargaining chips. Cooperation wasn't a matter of choice. I was their prisoner. I had been abducted, kidnapped. *Nevertheless*, I thought, *if given the choice, I would gladly yield to an examination in exchange for a tour of the ship*. And that's probably all they wanted from me anyhow, because an examination, lasting from several minutes to several hours, was the common thread that tied together all of the abduction stories I'd heard about.

It was apparent that hundreds of such examinations were going on at this very second in the cavernous room. In the first exciting moments of my arrival, as I gazed about in awe, drinking in the wonders of this extraterrestrial laboratory, I was so preoccupied with the experience that I didn't give much thought to the actual exams themselves.

But now I took notice of a large screen attached to the head of each table. It was not unlike a large-picture, high-resolution color television screen. Although I could make out the details of what was displayed on only a few of the closest ones to me, it was obvious that each work station was engaged in the study of a small part of the human anatomy.

On the screen directly behind me at the head of the table where a bearded young man with a full head of hair lay, I saw an exploded view of what appeared to be a human hair follicle. Three E.T.'s were intently bent over him and were using a variety of instruments, as well as their long, thin fingers, to explore the beard and the hair on his head.

On my right, a similar cluster of cosmic visitors was probing the ear of a female with Asian facial characteristics. The screen at the head of her table contained a very complex picture of the outer and inner details of what appeared to be the human auditory system.

All of the humans on the tables, as far as I could tell, were dressed in gowns similar to those worn by hospital patients.

I caught a brief glimpse of a very fat person—I couldn't tell if it was male or female—lying in the prone position one table ahead and to the left of where I stood. The person's gown was open in the back, and the buttocks were clearly visible and spread by a retractor device. The screen attached to that table contained a full-color graphic depiction of a human anus in an exploded view.

The lack of privacy and the personal natures of at least some of the examinations

bothered me. If this were a clinic on Earth, I'm sure more attention would have been paid to the simple concepts of human dignity and the right of privacy—even in the most primitive cultures. *But we were on a spaceship and not on Earth*, I told myself, *and perhaps there just wasn't room for such accommodations. Or, the extraterrestrials themselves simply did not share my standards in this regard.*

I presumed that I was going to be examined on the table at which we stood, and I was hoping that the scrutiny I received was going to be of a less personal nature. It also occurred to me at the same moment that I was dressed only in my underwear—a T-shirt and jockey shorts.

Gus seemed to anticipate my thoughts as I gazed around at the other people on tables. But instead of a gown like the ones the humans were wearing, he handed me a robe identical to the ones that he and the other aliens wore, and I quickly stepped into it. I also was supplied with a pair of very ordinary slippers, although they were the softest and most comfortable ones that I had ever worn.

Absentmindedly, I ran a hand over the table by which I stood.

"No, no," Gus said. "No examination for you. Come with me."

I heard perfect English, but I didn't see his lips move. It was as though the words, perfectly enunciated, came directly from his throat, much as a parrot can mimic human speech without the use of tongue or lips.

He turned and began walking away, followed by two associates. There must have been a slight hesitation on my part, because a fourth E.T. applied a gentle nudge to my shoulder with its left hand, indicating that I should follow. We wended our way between the tables and passed through a doorway that slid open as we approached. We walked wordlessly along a well-lighted corridor, the three aliens a few steps in front of me, and the fourth a step or two behind me. We passed several other extraterrestrials, who seemed to take no notice of, or interest in, me.

They had a strange walk. Rather than a slight bobbing up and down, typical of the walk of most humans, the aliens seemed to glide along smoothly, almost as though they were on wheels rather than legs, with no discernible vertical movement of the body as

they stepped from one leg to the other. I didn't know if it was normal to their species' form of locomotion, or if it was an adaptation to space flight.

Strange, I thought, that I should take notice of such a minor detail, when there are so many other remarkable sights that are infinitely more significant. As it turned out, their way of walking was just one of the millions of tiny bits of information that would flow into my brain and be stored there with little or no cognitive effort on my part. I was a sponge soaking up minutiae. At present, my memory banks are overflowing with minor details and events that I never gave any thought to at the moment I was absorbing them.

Our party turned off the corridor and through another sliding doorway into a room filled with an elaborate array of gauges, dials, monitors, and blinking lights on panels that covered all four walls from about waist level to the eye level of the E.T.'s. There was a small raised platform in the middle of the room where three aliens stood attending a bank of instruments.

Gus stopped, and the other E.T.'s in our party moved to his side in close formation, with their shoulders touching. A slight nudge on my arm from the extraterrestrial who was bringing up the rear also positioned me in the formation. Gus directed some incomprehensible speech to the crew members on the stage, and instantaneously we were in another room.

There was no sensation of being transported, although that's exactly what had happened, as I would learn from experience. It was as though the room that we had been in—the transporter room, as it were—simply evaporated, to be replaced by the new room in which we now stood. The process occurred so quickly as to create the illusion that the room itself had actually gone through the transformation.

If I hadn't known better, I would have sworn that we were now in the boardroom of any ordinary American corporation—albeit it a very futuristic one. But it did have a large rectangular conference table of very highly polished wood—or what seemed liked wood, perhaps mahogany—surrounded by 12 cushioned chairs in a pleasant pastel-blue color, five on each side and one on either end. There were several portholes in one of the walls, but from where I was standing I couldn't tell what they looked out upon. All I saw was

the blackness of night.

I was directed to one of the end chairs while Gus seated himself at the other end of the table. The E.T.'s in our party took their places in the chairs at the sides, and they were joined by others who entered the room and took seats, occupying all of them.

Gus was the first to speak.

"I think it is important to put your mind at ease," he said. "Yes, you are on a spaceship. Yes, the stories of so-called alien abductions that have been circulating among your people for 50 years or so are true for the most part. Yes, we are from another world. The name of our planet would translate into English as *Verdant*. We come in peace, and no harm will come to you. In the tens of thousands of encounters that we have had with people from Earth, not one has ever been harmed, intentionally or unintentionally."

I should point out at this point that all material quoted in this report is a true and faithful verbatim account. I had neither pen and notebook nor a tape recorder, but my memories are vivid and as I write these words I can recall with absolute accuracy the events that transpired and the exact words that were spoken during my three days on the ship. (I will deal with this phenomenon in a later chapter.)

For the most part, I will confine myself to a narrative account and rely heavily on paraphrasing. However, there are times when a more accurate picture of a conversation can be painted with the use of quotes to capture the drama, the nuances, and the significance of an event. In such cases, the actual words spoken can tell the story better than a simple straightforward account.

One such example involves a situation where the words were so provocative, so stunning, that I think it would be a disservice not to quote them exactly and precisely. The incident that led up to that moment began about 40 hours after I had been aboard the ship.

Of course, there is no night or day in space, so I kept track of the days by estimating the hours that I had been aboard.

I spent a total of about 72 hours on the ship. That means I was there 21-1/2 hours on Wednesday, June 11; the full 24 hours on Thursday; another full 24 hours on Friday; and

finally the first 2-1/2 hours of Saturday morning.

So 40 hours after arrival would mean that it was about 6:30 in the evening on Thursday, June 12, at my home on Earth.

Anyway, I found myself alone in a small lounge area with a particular female star traveler named "Gina." We were having a quiet conversation during which I was trying to get her to describe life on her home planet. But she had a persistent and compelling curiosity about the sex habits of humans, because she kept turning the conversation in that direction no matter how much I tried to change the subject and get her to talk about herself.

Suddenly, in the middle of this conversation, she stood up, let her robe slip to the floor and stood naked in front of me. I cannot imagine that I will ever forget the exact words she spoke to me at that moment.

"Do you want to do it?" she asked.

But that is another story.

Chapter Two

Orientation and Indoctrination

After Gus's introductory remarks, the conversation proceeded much like a typical board meeting of corporate officers on Earth. Gus introduced me to the others, calling out the Earth names that each had taken, which were inscribed on their name tags. The 11 other Verdants were: Robert, Emily, Kyle, Mel, Aaron, Don, Tom, Irene, George, Nat, and Ernie, seated in that order around the table, beginning at my right.

Gus spoke a few words in that incomprehensible language to the others at the table—I presume it was just a few words because it lasted no more than a couple of seconds. Then he switched to English.

"There is much to cover," he said, looking at me.

"Why don't you tell me why I'm here?" I asked.

The Verdant with the name tag Kyle said, "I see no harm in letting him ask a few questions. Besides, it's in his nature as a journalist."

So this apparently wasn't a random abduction. They knew at least one thing about me, which meant that I might actually have been targeted.

Gus agreed that I was free to ask questions any time, but he said that an outline of subjects to be covered was in place that would answer many of the questions that undoubtedly were on my mind. When I asked about the purpose of this gathering, Gus replied that it was a "Preparatory Orientation, Education, and Indoctrination" (POEI) conference specifically tailored to ready me for an "important designated task."

This particular session lasted approximately four hours, but there would be many more over the next three days. Whenever I had the opportunity, I peppered the E.T.'s with questions, hundreds of them. *Why am I here and how did I get here? What are you doing here? Who else is here? What are you doing to those people on the tables? Who are they?*

As to why I was there, it was explained that I was among several hundred people who had been chosen to participate in a program of such profound proportions that it would rank as one of the most important events in the history of humankind and the Earth. I was to play a specific role in that grand plan.

In the past, I was told, the star travelers assiduously avoided abducting anyone of prominence—including the rich, the famous, the socially powerful, civic leaders and government officials—anyone with more than a minimal ability to gain attention or influence public opinion.

Consequently, the abductees were invariably ordinary men and women—working-class people mostly from rural and semi-rural areas. They came from small-town America and gritty industrial areas of Europe; they were jungle tribesmen and desert nomads; they were Asian shepherds and African farmers; they represented every ethnic, racial and cultural group on Earth. In the reigning social orders, they would be the least likely to be believed when relating "preposterous" tales about being abducted by aliens.

People with unimpeachable reputations as upstanding citizens were bypassed under the correct assumption that their credibility would draw too much public attention if they chose to openly discuss their abductions. It was important to the Verdants' mission that all such tales be viewed with great skepticism.

This tactic worked admirably because the one common question that skeptics invariably asked, at least in America, was: *How come it's always Goober who is abducted and never Sheriff Taylor?*

The primary reason behind the effort to keep widespread attention to a minimum was to avoid causing panic.

From their space-based observation post, the aliens had personally witnessed the pandemonium and chaos that erupted along the Eastern Seaboard in 1938 when Orson Welles broadcast his famous "War of the Worlds" radio program in New Jersey. Tens of thousands of terrified listeners mistakenly believed that the fictional invasion of Earth by Martians—an adaptation of H. G. Wells' science fiction novel—was real.

The Verdants didn't want to be responsible for creating a repetition of that mass hysteria.

A secondary goal was to have as little influence on Earth's culture and daily routine as possible, such as possibly prompting some type of government or military response, be it legislation, mobilization, or some other reaction.

And since the purpose of the abductions was strictly clinical, to examine the physical makeup of the human species cell by cell, any human specimen would suffice. So the average Joe served their purposes nicely, making it unnecessary to risk involving anyone with substantial public credibility.

After all, the major news media would simply yawn and take little, if any, note of the claims of some Midwestern yokel spinning yarns about extraterrestrial visitors. But if the identical story were to be uttered by, let's say, the president of a major university, it would be banner news throughout the world. Millions would become overnight believers. Worldwide turmoil undoubtedly would ensue.

So they played it close to the vest. This policy also demanded no witnesses and no corroboration. Any substantiation had the potential to increase public believability, however slight, so multiple abductions also were ruled out. That is, while many thousands were taken, they all had a singular experience. No couples, no groups. And to keep the possibility of detection to the absolute minimum, the subjects were usually taken aboard in the middle of the night when they were alone and often asleep. They were kept for only a few hours at a time and then promptly returned before anyone could discover that they had been missing.

The Verdants reemphasized that all events involved single individuals only. That had nothing to do with their marital status, one of the Verdants at the table explained, but

rather that the individual taken was alone at the time. Did I detect a note of humor in this statement? It was hard to tell. In the beginning, I never saw a facial expression change. No smile. No frown. No arched eyebrow, which they didn't have anyway. No look of surprise with saucer eyes. Nothing but neutral blankness. That would change.

Although there have been scattered reports of multiple abductions, they said, these were mostly copycat stories from overworked imaginations. Others were simply fraudulent, the invention of publicity seekers and charlatans.

It is interesting to note that several of the Verdants took mild exception to the use of the word *abduction*. They chose to describe the incidents as "unsolicited visitations." I thought they were really stretching on that one. I chose to call the events what they were, at least from a human perspective—abductions.

But now the period of clinical study was coming to a close, and no further abductions would occur, they said. In fact, I was told, the group of people I saw in the examination room were the last ones who would ever experience that phenomenon. The moment had arrived to begin writing a new chapter in the extraterrestrial saga, they said. I was about to find out how that next chapter would unfold.

Chapter Three

Why Pick on Me?

The Verdants were doing an about-face now. Where previously they had actively encouraged skepticism, limiting their exposure to people whose reports of abduction would be least likely to be believed, they now had taken a 180-degree turn. Believability and public acceptance were now key components in their “agenda.” And those with high levels of credibility were integral to that purpose..

"What agenda?" I asked.

Several Verdants started speaking at once, but Gus raised his hand to quiet them. He looked down the length of the table, and his eyes seemed to bore into mine.

"Contact," he said simply. "The time has come for our two peoples to meet formally. You will play a part in helping to bring that about."

To say I was astounded would be an exercise in understatement. My head swam with this revelation even as Gus continued speaking. I realized that I was only hearing portions of what he was saying. What my ears did pick up in my anxious state is that I was expected to go public with my story after I got back home.

I, the supreme naysayer, was now supposed to announce that the stories of abductions were indeed true after all, and that it had happened to me.

Contact. I couldn't believe it. I was dumbfounded by the prospect. The implications were beyond imagination. Even as I considered the effect it would have on the world—it would completely change humankind's destiny—I couldn't imagine what purpose I could

serve.

Were these guys kidding? I thought. What possible effect could my tiny, unknown voice have on Earth's inhabitants among the thousands of other voices that had been saying the same thing for decades—yet had been ignored?

"Why would anyone believe me?" I asked. "Better still, who would even pay attention? Except, of course, a few hundred people who know me, and they would just conclude that I had finally flipped my lid. I'd be looked upon as just another fruitcake."

"No," I said, "I won't do it."

"You will do it," Gus responded. "Not because of any coercion, but because you will choose to. You will come to understand that you have—how did one of your leaders put it?—a rendezvous with destiny. And you will be convinced of that and will be eager to play your part once you have finished your POEI."

"So I'm supposed to go back and tell the world that some extraterrestrial creatures want to do lunch," I said incredulously. "And you expect presidents and kings and prime ministers and Indian chiefs to take my word for it? Believe me, no one will buy it."

"Yours will be but one voice among many," Gus replied. "Others also have been chosen, so you will not be alone."

"Yeah, well, thousands of people have told these same yarns before, and still nobody in his right mind puts much store in them," I said. "Why should they start now?"

"It is different," Gus explained. "We didn't want the public to believe before, but now we do. It will happen."

The Verdants had done this thousands of times before, they said, and they always use the same formula. Why? Because it works. Basically, it goes like this:

Civilizations are monitored and studied. When one has progressed to the point where it is on the verge of taking its first preliminary steps into space, the Verdants make a determination on whether it is suitable for admission to the Intergalactic Federation of Sovereign Planets (IFSP). If it is deemed acceptable, preparations are made for contact.

Of course, by this time the Verdants have learned everything there is to know about the planet and its inhabitants through hundreds of years of observation and study. In

almost all cases, "unsolicited visitations" (which we on Earth know as abductions) are conducted by the thousands for years, perhaps decades, preliminary to official contact. These events are kept as low-key as possible to avert mass hysteria. The Verdants' purpose is strictly clinical: to examine the physiological and anatomical makeup of the species and to catalogue and record their findings.

Finally, one last group of "visitors" is brought aboard to be prepared through POEI to serve as a liaison between the two species. This latter group consists of prominent individuals within the species who have the power to influence public opinion and planetary leaders. Their job is to lay the foundation that eventually will lead to a summit conference between the Verdants and the inhabitants of the planet.

I was told that two classes of people had been selected to prepare for the planned Verdant–Earth summit. The first group consisted of several hundred of some of the world's most prominent citizens. They represented every segment of human endeavor and had recently been, or were in the process of going through, the same Preparatory Orientation, Education, and Indoctrination program that I was currently participating in.

They came from government, industry, commerce, religion, the arts, entertainment, sports, education, science, politics, communication, law—from every imaginable field. They had one thing in common, though—credibility—the power to personally influence large segments of the population. Each one was assigned, or was being assigned, a specific function of his or her own toward the ultimate goal of preparing the masses of people on Earth for inevitable contact.

The Verdants bestowed upon each the formal title of "Ambassador."

The second group consisted of an equal number of relatively unknown people, such as myself, who were being prepared to perform secondary, but nevertheless significant, supporting tasks. Credibility, while important, was not as crucial among this group because they were selected for their skills rather than for their standing in the population. They would play only minor roles in the campaign to influence public opinion.

We were given the official title "Deputy Envoy."

These two groups represented people different from the average, everyday humans

who had been a part of the abduction process for several decades. The purpose of those original abductions was strictly to study the human physiology.

But with that phase now over, or as it would be as soon as the last of the people currently on the examination tables were returned, there came a radical 180-degree shift in the program. Controlled public knowledge and acceptance of the reports of abductions became a necessary ingredient in this final phase. It was now essential that the people of Earth be told that contact was imminent. But the information had to be relayed in a way that would not create alarm.

"Who are these people?" I asked.

"We just told you," one of the other star travelers replied.

"I mean, specifically, who are they? The important ones. What are their names?"

"Well, everybody in both groups is important," the one who called himself Don said. "But if you mean the ones in the first group, the Ambassadors, the ones who are known to large segments of the population, believe me, you would recognize quite a few of them."

"We'll let you take a look at the roster before you leave the ship," Don said to me.

"And what function are we nobodies supposed to serve?" I asked.

"You're misinterpreting," Gus cut in. "Your use of the word *nobodies* is inaccurate. Even those of you who are relatively unknown must still meet a minimum standard of competence. While it's true that you and the other secondary figures have not established widespread prominence, you also have to possess a certain credibility among your peers. Everyone in your group meets that requirement, and that's why you were chosen."

If I didn't know better, I might have thought that I had annoyed him.

"Okay, so what do you want from me?" I asked.

"When the Ambassadors begin revealing the truth about what has been going on in your skies for hundreds of years, it will be necessary that the people of Earth have access to a central source of information. There will be much fear and curiosity.

"Information from the Ambassadors will be coming out in tightly controlled circumstances from widely dispersed locations. Like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the

individual pieces would be virtually meaningless to the average person.

"Rumors, half-truths, and complete myths would sweep the world like an epidemic. We need a formal white paper that will give the people a look at the final picture even as it is taking shape—to let them know what to expect, to understand the disparate events that will be taking place."

Publication, Don explained, would mark the start of the formal sequence of events that would lead to eventual contact between representatives of the two worlds. The various Ambassadors and Deputy Envoys would begin actively playing the roles that they had been assigned. For many, aside from their primary designated tasks, a secondary role would be to lend support and credence to the authenticity of the white paper. They would assure the people that this was the authorized reference work to turn to for answers to their questions.

While the reference work would offer only a general overview, very explicit and precise information would be made available to the world's leaders by the Ambassadors in building the framework for the summit. A million details had to be worked out to plan and coordinate the historic event. The process was expected to take several years. The minor players, the Deputy Envoys, also would begin performing their assigned tasks.

This is where the value of credibility would be vital. The major mainstream media have, for very solid reasons, not given any substantial coverage to personal reports of alien abductions over the years.

As a journalist, I not only understand, but support this policy. A good reporter requires corroboration before he or she goes public with any story. The mainstream news media cannot be expected to run personal stories of tales of abduction—or any other fantastic story, for that matter—simply by taking the word of someone who claims to have experienced such a phenomenon. The media have an obligation to their readers, viewers, and listeners to ensure that such reports have at least a reasonable element of veracity and legitimacy. That means that there must be corroborating evidence that such an event occurred.

And there's the Catch-22. Without corroboration, the mainstream media can't report

real abductions. But since the abductions always involved lone individuals in the past, there could be no corroboration.

That journalistic policy served the interests of the Verdants quite well when silence was desired. But the media would not be able to ignore the story if a prominent religious leader, head of government, or major television personality admitted to also having been aboard the starship. This would be news—BIG news. And again it would serve the Verdants' interests now that they had reversed course and would be seeking widespread public knowledge of their presence.

The calm assurances of respected world personalities would eliminate the likelihood of any public upheaval, although, in their experience, they said, there probably would be isolated cases of people “freaking out.”

“Also, given the tenuous hold that some of your people have on sanity and rationality—and again this goes to the extreme diversity of your species—there is no way to avoid that,” one of the Verdants said. “However, we have medicines that will be made available if they are desired.”

As the list of those leaders of society who “came out,” so to speak, grew into the hundreds, public skepticism would gradually dissolve, to be replaced by composed acceptance—reinforced by the moderating voices of the Ambassadors.

When the time was ripe, the star travelers, in conjunction with those who had received assignments to help smooth the way, would then make arrangements with the various Earth governments to set a time and place for the terrestrial–extraterrestrial meeting.

“It is a formula that always works,” Don added.

I asked why they didn’t just land on the White House lawn and ask to see the president.

“We are quite familiar with the human military mind,” Irene responded. “It’s shoot first and ask questions later. No, our way is better.”

“Besides,” said the one called Aaron, “we know the formula that works. We’ve had many millions of years to test and refine it. Above all, there must be order, and your

suggestion is a sure-fire prescription for disorder and hysteria."

"Why not have the various Ambassadors just report all they know to their leaders?" I asked. "I don't see the purpose of the white paper."

"Too disjointed," Aaron said. "There would be no coordination, no cohesiveness. It would be tantamount to a symphony orchestra playing without a conductor. The logistics must be anchored with a framework, and the white paper becomes the centerpiece of the entire undertaking."

"Sounds good," I said, "but why are you telling me?"

"We want you to write the treatise," Gus answered.

Before I could even respond to that blockbuster, Gus continued by saying that I would not be the designated primary messenger and that the purpose of the white paper simply was to serve as a primer of sorts. It would be available as a reference work as growing numbers of people began accepting the validity of the reports of the impending summit. The white paper, they emphasized, would not play a major part in bringing about public acceptance. That role would be performed by the various Ambassadors.

But once public acceptance began taking hold, the white paper would help to coalesce and to bring into focus the millions of bits of information that would be carried by the Ambassadors. It would help to give a general overview of who the Verdants are and what the people of Earth could expect in very general terms, as humankind begins its magnificent adventure as space travelers.

"But why me?" I asked. "Why not Sam Donaldson? He's a—"

"We know who he is," Emily interrupted. "You haven't seen the list yet." Did I detect a slight sparkle of amusement in her dark eyes?

I had not been chosen at random, they said. I met the basic criteria that other candidates who had been considered also met. Among these considerations were a college education, a career in a mainstream profession, traveling a true and steady course as an upstanding citizen, and no association with any disreputable or flaky fringe groups.

The ideal candidate would have a journalism or related writing background, and, paradoxically, a reputation among peers as a skeptic, one who had always discounted

tales of alien abductions.

Their reasoning was that if a consummate doubter suddenly began talking about his own visit to an alien spacecraft, this uncharacteristic turn would be certain to pique a certain amount of notice. Also, a former critic of so-called alien abductions who suddenly had a change of heart would be more likely to gain the ear of a jaded public—the credibility thing again—than someone who had not been so outspoken on the subject.

The consequential interest and attention that would accrue was vital to the Verdants' goals. Another major consideration was finding someone who could drop out of sight for a period of several days without raising any concern or suspicions. While this was not absolutely vital to their plans—because the designated Ambassadors could be brought aboard for a few hours at a time and then returned to their homes each night over an extended period of time—it was a more convenient arrangement that they preferred.

Naturally, that still left a large field of qualified candidates. What tipped the scales in my favor—if that's what it can be called—they said, was a recommendation, a personal endorsement, by a major figure in the publishing business who had also been selected as an Ambassador.

"Who?" I asked in surprise.

"No names at this point," Gus said.

"We have great respect for this person's judgment," Nancy said. "He/she—we won't say which—felt that you were up to the task and that you met all of the qualifications. You're level-headed, you know how to write a simple declarative English sentence that conveys information, and you have the time, since you are retired. We could have made a random selection from many qualified candidates, but we chose to go with the personal referral."

I started to roll that bombshell around in my head. It had to be someone from the *Los Angeles Times*, I surmised, because I had spent 25 years out of my 30-year career in journalism on that newspaper. I knew virtually no one on a personal basis at any other major publication. I had worked on a small suburban newspaper when I first entered the

business in 1963, but that weekly journal would be considered inconsequential in contrast to major publications with worldwide influence. Besides, it was virtually defunct at this point, a mere shell of its insignificant former self.

I said I was flattered by the referral but insisted that they still had made an error because I would be considered, at best, an average writer. I mentioned some of my favorite writers at the *Times*: David Lamb, Eric Malnic, Peter King, Bob Hilburn.

Nevertheless, they said, the fact remained that I had been chosen. The one named Tom also pointed out that they weren't necessarily looking for the best writer, but rather someone who could meet the minimum standards of literacy in addition to the other criteria.

"Bob Pool," I said. "This would be right up his alley."

"Besides," Tom continued as though he never even heard my words, "we know that you are an able interviewer, a skilled gatherer of facts, and an effective organizer. As such, that qualifies you to report this story. It will be, after all, a journal and not a novel. It needs only to inform, not entertain."

"Yes, but—"

"We are beginning to quibble," Gus cut in. "Let's move along."

"I don't see any pencils or paper," I said, with just the slightest edge of sarcasm creeping into my tone, which I immediately regretted and hoped would go unnoticed.

The statement was met with blank stares.

"To take notes," I said. "I can't report a story without taking notes."

Gus told me not to concern myself with that minor detail. Taking the kind of prodigious notes that would be required would be both laborious and extremely time-consuming.

Instead, he promised that I would have total recall of my experiences aboard the ship for about a month. After that, my capacity for recall would return to normal, and I would remember whatever the average person might recollect under similar circumstances. Total recall would be especially valuable when writing dialogue to ensure that direct quotes were verbatim accounts of the actual words spoken, he said.

More facts and figures were thrown at me in a steady stream. I hoped they could keep the promise about the total recall, because there was no way I was going to retain even one percent of the information without notes.

It seems that the Verdants have been intensely studying Earth and its inhabitants for roughly 1,000 years, a milestone marker for them that I will explore in greater detail in a later chapter. Initially, they simply observed and kept records. Every dialect and language has been mastered. They have a complete grasp of Earth's history and a familiarity with its cultures, acquired both through personal observation and by accessing every shred of data kept in humankind's storehouses of knowledge and learning.

In fact, one boasted—at least it seemed like a boast to me—they probably know more about Earth and its people than any aggregation of the current inhabitants of the planet.

Naturally, what with tens of thousands of personal examinations, they have a complete and thorough understanding of the physiology of the human body, a storehouse of knowledge that humans wouldn't come close to approximating, if left to their own devices, for 600 or 700 years!

Chapter Four

Just Like Home

Gus ended the session with the announcement that four Earth hours had passed since I had been taken out of my bedroom and that I probably needed to rest, especially since I had left in the middle of the night. It was about 6:30 or so Wednesday morning at home.

He was right. I was quite sleepy, and a weary ache gripped the muscles of my neck and shoulders. I had slept only about 5 hours in the last 24.

With that he rose, along with several of the others, and strode toward another one of those sliding doors that always seemed to sense the appropriate moment to open and close. It was obviously much more sophisticated than the devices on Earth that open when someone gets close enough to activate a proximity sensor. I saw many instances on the ship where crew members would actually lean against the door, or pass within inches of it, without activating it. But once one of the aliens decided to actually enter or leave, the door seemed to recognize that intent and would activate, sliding into the bulkhead and then closing when the ingress or egress was completed.

This time, I didn't need a nudge and I followed, with two of the other Verdants bringing up the rear. We retraced our steps for a short distance and then entered what reminded me of a large freight elevator.

There was a slight feeling of movement, but I couldn't tell if we were rising, descending, or moving laterally. The ride, if that's what it was, took less than ten seconds,

at which time the door slid open and we entered another long corridor. Our destination was close enough so that we didn't need to rely upon the transporter device, because we walked perhaps only 200 feet before Gus turned through another doorway.

The room was straight out of a Holiday Inn. It was the closest thing to home that I had seen since coming aboard.

"Rest now. We'll talk later," Gus said. The travelers left, and I plopped down on the king-size bed and melted into it. It was quite comfortable, and I dropped off to sleep almost instantly.

I was awakened by a soft tapping at the door. I think most people have an inner clock that gives them the ability to estimate pretty accurately how much time has passed after taking a nap. I know I can usually hazard a fairly decent guess, and I figured that I had dozed for about three hours. As it turned out, I wasn't off by more than 15 minutes. The time at home would be about 9:30 or 10 Wednesday morning.

I sat up to see a crew member enter. *That door must really have a brain*, I thought. The Verdant had tapped on it, but it didn't open until my state of mind indicated "come in." The visitor was pushing a serving cart loaded with a wide array of food and beverages—all of an Earthly variety. There was a sizzling steak with mushrooms and grilled onions, hot rolls and sweet creamery butter, fresh fruit, hot coffee and tea, a beverage that was unmistakably Diet Pepsi (I took a preliminary sip), steamed vegetables, a green salad, vanilla and chocolate pudding, and apple and blueberry pie.

It was a regular feast, and I realized I was ravenous. The Verdant set up a table with dinnerware and condiments, and quietly left without uttering a sound. I also discovered on the cart containers of scrambled eggs, hot sausages, pancakes, toast, fruit preserves, hot and cold cereal, cold milk, and sugar.

I chose to go with the breakfast items, and I ate with gusto. It was just like super room service at an American hotel. As I ate, I noticed what appeared to be a TV remote control on the nightstand. I aimed it at the big-screen television set, and it sprang to life. I surfed through about 500 channels, finding all of the major networks and specialty channels, the whole range of what I could find on my own TV at home, and much, much more.

All of the shows were of the American variety, almost all in English, although there were the usual ethnic and foreign-language programs that are familiar to most American cable systems. I came across reruns of "I Love Lucy" and saw Bob Vila at work installing a window. There were soap operas, sitcoms, dramas, action-adventure shows, current films, sporting events, and documentaries. Even commercials.

This was a live feed—not a videotape—because I caught a news program about the Timothy McVeigh bombing trial, and it was current.

After eating, I stepped to the doorway of what I thought should be the bathroom (if I were in a Holiday Inn), and the door slid silently open. It was a modern affair of modest proportions that held a vanity with washbasin and drawers. There was a toilet, a shower stall, a toilet paper roll, and a towel bar with clean towels. There was also a standard medicine cabinet.

I used the toilet and then showered. I found an electric razor with its own power source in one of the drawers of the vanity, and I shaved. The medicine cabinet contained an assortment of colognes, after-shave lotions, and skin lotions. I also brushed my teeth after coming across toothpaste and a new toothbrush.

One of the drawers contained a stack of neatly folded robes. I found a supply of fresh white T-shirts and boxer shorts in another, and finally several pairs of slippers identical to the ones that I was wearing. I changed into the clean underwear and slipped on one of the robes. I saw no need to change slippers at that point. Thus refreshed, after about a half hour by myself I decided to leave, and the door with a brain slid open.

Gus was sitting on the edge of the bed, and another traveler wearing the name tag Emily was standing in front of the TV watching a segment of "Law and Order," whose characters I recognized.

Chapter Five

Our Distant Neighbors

Gus chatted amiably with me as we retraced our route to the boardroom. He had boundless curiosity about my thoughts and opinions on the whole spectrum of contemporary issues. Even though he'd had numerous contacts with individual humans, he said, it was always on the basis of physiological and anatomical examinations. And during that process, the abductees were asleep for the most part and were on the ship for only a few hours at a time.

Only in the last several months, when designated Ambassadors and Deputy Envoys began coming aboard, did he have the opportunity to engage in extended personal conversations with humans.

While the Verdants had been studying Earth and its civilizations for a millennium, they knew the planet from a detached perspective as observers. Gus yearned to see it from a personal point of view, through the eyes and minds of the people themselves.

"I know that armies march off to war," he said, "but I don't know what the individual soldier is feeling and thinking when he faces battle. Our people have never personally experienced war."

He picked my brain at every opportunity during our free moments together when we weren't conducting business in the boardroom, as I'm sure he did with all of the other recent visitors who had been brought aboard for POEI.

Once, while we were chatting in my quarters as I was eating one of those singularly delectable meals, Gus casually asked me if I had ever been in a fight. My hand stopped

mid-fork to my mouth, and I eyed him suspiciously to try to gauge the import of the question. I think that, momentarily, the thought flashed through my mind that I was being challenged, and I'm not ashamed to admit that it scared the daylights out of me.

It was an innocent enough query, however, just another in a deluge of questions prompted by simple curiosity that he had thrown my way over the course of my time aboard.

"Oh, sure," I said. "I don't think I know any man who hasn't had a fight at one time or another in his life. Mostly it happens when we are boys. After we become adults, men usually settle their differences in other ways—such as through the courts—rather than punching it out."

"What is it like?" he asked.

"What—fighting?"

"Yes. What goes through your mind when you face another person in physical combat?"

I really couldn't give him much insight into the nature of human aggression because I had never had a physical fight as an adult. I had my share of rough-and-tumble scrapes while growing up in the gritty coal-mining and railroad town of Tamaqua, Pennsylvania. But the last real fight I had was when I was 16, some 46 years earlier, when I was blindsided by a sucker punch that broke my nose.

"I suppose there is fear and anger," I said. "It has been so long. But I do remember the lightning bolt-type pain that slammed into my brain when I took the punch. I couldn't see for several seconds. And blood. Lots of blood."

"Fascinating," Gus said quietly. "What purpose was served by the combat? What issues or differences of opinion were resolved?"

It was a question for which I could find no satisfactory answer. I shrugged.

"It was just stupid," I said.

"You have never been in a fight?" I asked.

"I think it's important that you understand our position on combat," he said. "But I can't give you a brief answer. Why don't we have a private discussion later?"

I said that would be fine with me. We reached the boardroom, and, after we were all seated, Gus simply beckoned to me with outstretched hand, palm up, indicating that the floor was mine.

"Where is your planet located?" I asked.

The Verdants told me that their home planet is about two and one-half times the size of Earth and is located in a nearby galaxy—at least in astronomical terms—about 14 million light-years from Earth. A light-year is the distance that light will travel in a year at a speed of 186,000 miles per second. That's roughly six trillion miles. So 14 light-years is in the neighborhood of 84 trillion miles. Multiply that by a million, for 14 million light-years, and the distance is 84 million trillion miles. That's an 84 followed by 18 zeroes—84,000,000,000,000,000,000.

Now that may seem like a far piece, but considering that the outer reaches of the known universe are about 15 billion light-years away, 14 million light-years is less than one-thousandth of that distance. Put in simpler terms, if the universe were a country 1,000 miles across, these Verdants would live less than a mile down the road from us. That, for all practical purposes, makes them neighbors.

Their atmosphere is similar to Earth's, with just a slightly higher oxygen content, and temperature ranges are also comparable to ours in a naturally occurring state, although they have complete control over the weather and climate and can adjust either, including temperatures, to suit their needs. Their sun is slightly larger than Earth's, but their planet is also in an orbit a bit farther away from it so that they get about the same amount of heat and light as Earth does from its own sun.

A year on their planet would equal about three Earth years, or roughly 1,000 Earth days. A day on their planet, however, is equal to about 55 Earth hours. There are 17 planets in their solar system.

They took their first steps into space 229 million years ago—all time frames mentioned here (years, hours, days) are Earth measurements—although it took several million years before they achieved their current level of technology. As to the extent of that technology, both in space exploration and home-planet advances, there is no way

that I could possibly come close to describing it. But let me just touch upon some of the highlights that I learned in the course of my discussions and on personal tours of the ship itself.

I already mentioned that the Verdants have complete control over the climate and weather of their home planet. This also holds true for the other planets that they have colonized, but more about this later.

Obviously, they have the capacity to travel many times faster than the speed of light. They said it is a million times quicker in "conventional" travel mode, but my mind boggled at that figure, and I couldn't accept it at first. A million times faster than the speed of light would mean that they could cover the 14 million light-years' distance between their world and ours in 14 years.

As the extraterrestrials spoke, I began to become more receptive to their claims. They explained that they didn't really travel in the conventional sense of actually moving across a set distance from Point A to Point B. Rather, they just set their course for a specific point in the universe, engage their mechanisms, and simply disappear from their point of origin and instantly reappear at their destination.

Their machines have limits, however, so they cannot traverse an infinite distance in one jump. They do it in stages. Let's say they want to travel a million light-years down the road. That's six million trillion miles. They can cover that distance in one year traveling at a million times faster than the speed of light. So, if they set a course to jump at the maximum capacity of, let's say, six million miles, and they step on the gas, they instantly disappear and reappear six million miles away.

If they put the machine on automatic pilot, or cruise control, so to speak, so that the device automatically activates after each jump and it activates a trillion times in one year, they would find themselves a million light-years away in that time.

As near as my limited arithmetic abilities will allow, I figure that a trillion jumps per year works out to about 32,000 times a second. But even that would be a slow way of getting around the universe, considering its vastness. In "conventional" travel mode at one million times the speed of light, it would take the Verdants 15,000 years to get to the

edge of the universe.

Apparently, they can cut the time down considerably on these "longer" distances by traveling through wormholes, time and space warps, and black holes. They didn't dwell too much on this subject because it was understood that I would not be able to grasp it.

Suffice it to say that the Verdants can get around the universe in pretty quick fashion.

If I were a general assignment newspaper reporter in 1945, I think I could do a fairly decent job of reporting that an atomic bomb was detonated over Japan without having any understanding of nuclear physics. What's to say except that there was one mighty big explosion. The scientists could fill in the details.

As such, several human scientists have been well versed on the subject, and, acting in their capacities as Ambassadors, will issue a clear statement when the time is ripe.

Thanks to their technology, the Verdants' average life span is in the neighborhood of an astonishing 20,000 years. It wasn't always so, of course, because they evolved like all living life forms, with natural life spans at first lasting only several generations. After millions of years of trying, they discovered the secrets that allowed them to keep pushing the limits on life extension.

The first faltering steps gave them a couple of decades of added time. Gradually, it became several hundred years, then several thousand years, until they finally hit what they now believe is the absolute limit of 20,000 years. They have not been able to improve upon that mark for several million years. (As a side note, it occurs to me that in a "conventional" travel mode, it would theoretically be possible for an individual with a life span of 20,000 years to make a 15,000-year one-way trip to the edge of the universe.)

Now this breakthrough could lead to some pretty interesting side effects, and it did, they said. First and foremost was the obvious need to limit their birth rates. But even if each individual simply replaced himself, they would soon run out of living space, so they began colonizing, moving large segments of the population to other planets.

But what I found quite fascinating was the revelation that Mother Nature, in the form of evolution, stepped in and orchestrated a fundamental change in their physiology, whereby females can bear but one offspring in their lifetimes.

They have the medical technology, of course, to circumvent that natural restriction, but it is rarely utilized. Every member of the species is aware of the necessity of population control. Compliance is of a cultural nature, and there is no specific law against having more than one child, they said.

Lest there be concern that the Verdants have colonization designs on the Earth, it should be stressed that they never displace native populations of any other planet. The worlds they colonize are exclusively uninhabited by intelligent life forms. In fact, most of the planets are initially uninhabitable and would not support life in their natural states.

But their engineers and scientists can tame even the most hostile environment, even going so far as changing the orbit of a planet to move it closer to its sun if the planet is too cold, or moving it out farther if it is too close, and, therefore, too hot.

Planets with the rudimentary elements to sustain life—where simple plant and animal life forms have evolved—are also candidates for colonization. The engineers go in, customize the atmosphere to meet their biological needs, rearrange the topography, and alter the weather and climate if necessary. All native plant and animal life forms are studied for compatibility. They have no qualms about eliminating plants or simple animal life forms that prove to be obstacles to colonization. However, any planet that contains native sentient life forms is considered off-limits for colonization.

Scouting parties from their distant world are engaged in a constant search of the heavens—exploring, mapping, and cataloguing. Planets with hostile environments that cannot support life, or that can sustain only the most basic life forms, are tagged as possible colonization sites.

Others that contain higher forms of life are classified according to the inhabitants' level of development. Those species with high intelligence, especially if they have developed complex civilizations, receive the most scrutiny. Once a planet with higher life forms is discovered, the Verdants take up positions in that particular solar system and begin a period of observation and study that lasts anywhere from several weeks to several hundred years.

The planets requiring the shortest periods of study are those whose most advanced

species is considered to be at least 10,000 years away from developing the capabilities of space flight. The planet is catalogued, and the exploration party moves on. Several thousand years may pass before it is revisited to determine the level of advancement of the civilization.

Those civilizations that have progressed to the point where they are within 1,000 years of taking their first steps into space to visit the planets and eventually the stars are assigned a permanent observation party. The purpose is to ensure that the species under study does not pose any threat to any other cosmic civilization once it embarks into space.

The observation team will put the planet and its inhabitants under the microscope, in a manner of speaking. It will study and chronicle the history; the cultures; the technology; the languages; and the psychological, physiological, and anatomical makeup of the inhabitants. It will learn everything there is to learn about both the planet and its inhabitants. If it is determined that the species is suitable for becoming partners in the Intergalactic Federation of Sovereign Planets (IFSP), the observation party becomes, in effect, a nursemaid. It will guide the species through the final critical stages to ensure a smooth transition into its venture toward interstellar travel.

Although they are a peaceful people, the Verdants are quite prepared to take draconian steps to prevent a particularly ferocious and warlike people from making that transition and posing a threat to other civilizations, they told me. Their scientists can predict with great accuracy, after a reasonable period of study, whether a particular species would become a menace to the interplanetary community if it were allowed to make the transition to space travel.

In the darkest scenario, the dangerous species is simply isolated—denied access to space travel. There have been instances where ferocious animals have developed the intelligence necessary through evolution to go into space and have compatible bodies to physically achieve this feat if left to their own devices. In such cases, isolation becomes the only option, and they are confined to their home planet.

This, of course, requires intervention by the star travelers, which generally involves

sabotaging the first preliminary satellites launched into space.

It's not hard to imagine the level of frustration that occurs when space probe after space probe after space probe inexplicably fails and falls back to the planet's surface in contradiction of all scientific theory. Their scientists probably would be pulling their hair out—assuming they had hair to pull out, of course. The Verdants said that invariably the total exasperation finally leads to abandonment of the space program.

Of course, permanent monitoring parties are assigned to these planets to maintain the program of sabotage in the event future generations might once again try. Having been denied access to the heavens, and being particularly ferocious to begin with—the reason for isolation—it is not uncommon for a species to release its pent-up aggravation by warring among itself.

Time is a leavening agent, though, and there are only two possible outcomes when a species is isolated. If it doesn't destroy itself through internecine slaughter, which occasionally happens, it eventually evolves into a more conciliatory and cooperative species that can live in harmony with itself and its neighbors. At that point, it is allowed to resume its space program and ultimately join the IFSP.

So far, something like 27,000 species have been assimilated into the universal alliance of planetary civilizations. Many of those species originally had been isolated and confined until evolution did its job. Only about 200 species are currently confined to their home planets, the Verdants said.

In addition, the Verdants themselves have colonized roughly 246,000 formerly uninhabited planets. Some of these are in the Milky Way Galaxy, but the vast majority are scattered to the farthest reaches of the universe. Their population is variously estimated at a total of 5,000 trillion on all of the planets, which range from those as small as our own moon to those as large as our own sun.

Of the 27,000 other species that have advanced civilizations on an equal number of planets and have become star travelers, there is a population of approximately 150 trillion. They didn't say so at this point, but I suspected that the Verdants were probably the leaders of the universe—the major superpower—based upon their population and the

number of planets they control.

As I would learn later, this assessment was far off the mark.

It seemed obvious to me at the time that they were the only colonists as well. This guess was more accurate.

Chapter Six

A View of the Cosmos

Suddenly I realized that I was very tired, and Gus was quick to notice. We had spent about 12 hours in three sessions after my nap, including two breaks. I had been aboard the ship approximately 20 hours, making it somewhere between 9 and 11 o'clock Wednesday night at home. I also became aware that I had to use the bathroom. Gus told me that I was to get a full "night's" sleep and that we would resume the meeting in the "morning."

The star travelers were gracious and thoughtful hosts, and they had kept me supplied with a regular and ample supply of refreshments during the meeting. There were cookies, fresh fruits, potato chips, pretzels, finger sandwiches, sodas, and cold water. I snacked judiciously during the 12 hours. The Verdants themselves neither drank nor ate during that time.

I was escorted back to "my" quarters where I used the facilities, took another shower, and put on a clean robe and underwear and a new pair of slippers. The bathroom was spic-and-span and had obviously been tidied up while I was away. The dirty towels had been replaced with fresh ones, and my previously worn garments, which I had dropped on the floor—I'm almost ashamed to admit—had been removed.

Again, the door slid open when I decided to exit. Gus and another Verdant, who bore the name tag Gina (the female I mentioned in Chapter One), were waiting for me. A cart of delicious-looking food had been wheeled into the room. I dined on macaroni-and-

cheese, garlic toast, a crisp garden salad with bleu cheese dressing, and plump red strawberries. I passed up the steaming Italian sausage and the baked ham because I'm not much of a meat eater. I chased the food down with an ice-cold beverage. I also passed on the desserts, but they did look tantalizing—a rich chocolate ice cream, banana cream pie, and tapioca pudding.

"Where do you guys get this stuff?" I asked. "Is there a supermarket somewhere in the neighborhood that I don't know about?"

I suppose the satisfaction of a good meal had something to do with my obviously expansive mood. The two Verdants simply stared at me. Had I stumped them with the question?

"The food," I said, pointing to the cart.

"Oh," Gus replied. "We grow it. It's plant matter. It contains all of the nutrients that your body requires."

"That's not real meat?" I asked, picking up one of the sausages.

"Mercy, no," Gina replied. If I hadn't been looking at that unchanging neutral face, I would have bet that she had spoken the words in mild shock or disdain. "We don't kill animals."

"Well, in that case, I'll treat myself," I said, and popped the sausage into my mouth. It was scrumptious.

"How fattening is it?" I asked between chews.

"You can eat as much as your appetite will allow," Gina said. "Your metabolism and body mass will remain at ideal levels."

"You're kidding!" I exclaimed. "And I've been watching my calories? What about the desserts?"

"All processed vegetable matter," she replied. "Even the fresh fruits, milk, eggs, everything. Much more nutritious than the authentic. You do not have to be concerned about calories. Your body will take only what it needs for current use and will discard the rest."

"Now you tell me," I said, and dug into the banana cream pie.

While I was eating, Gus explained that Gina had been assigned to be my personal guide and attendant. He said I was free to roam the ship and that Gina would accompany me. There were only a few places that were off-limits, including the bridge and the private quarters of the ship's officers and the other prominent abductees (he called them visitors) who might be aboard at the time.

I assumed that the Verdants wanted to keep the other humans and myself isolated from each other, which is why their quarters were restricted. But that turned out not to be the case. They simply wanted to preserve the humans' privacy. That stood in stark contrast to the utter lack of privacy that I had witnessed in the examination room.

Even here there is a pecking order, a class system, I thought. The people on the examination tables were just specimens whose purpose would have been served once they had been sent back to their homes. They served no further need. However, the VIPs, the Ambassadors, and, I assumed, even the Deputy Envoys like me got special consideration because we would play pivotal roles after we returned to Earth. That is, our continued goodwill would be required. We might be miffed and uncooperative—and justifiably so—if the Verdants went probing around our anuses. An image of the fat person in the examination room flashed through my mind.

Actually, it turned out that this assessment was unfair. The Verdants have an enormous respect for all sentient life forms, including those species who have to be isolated due to their dangerous tendencies. The logistical considerations required the large central examination area, I was told. Since most of the subjects were asleep during their brief periods on the ship, it was felt that they wouldn't suffer any appreciable loss of dignity as a result of being examined out in the open.

But because the Ambassadors and Deputy Envoys were required to be awake during most of their time aboard, every effort was made to respect their individuality and to ensure their comfort. This included private quarters.

I actually ran into one of these distinguished guests later, and there was no attempt by the Verdants to keep us apart. After I finished stuffing myself with banana cream pie for which there would be no caloric penalty, I thought I'd take Gus up on his offer to let me

tour the ship. I wasn't yet ready for bed because of the earlier nap. Gus left the room, and Gina stayed on.

She asked me where I wanted to go, and I told her that I'd like to get a look into space. Although I had seen many portholes, I had not yet had the opportunity to actually peer out of one, I told her.

"I'll do even better than that," she said. "Come."

I followed her out the door and into the corridor. We hadn't gone more than 50 paces before I spotted another human strolling toward us, accompanied by a Verdant. When we were within 20 feet of each other, I immediately recognized him. These guys weren't kidding when they said they were bringing aboard some very important people. This guy was big-time.

It turned out that he was also taking a tour with his personal guide and attendant. The guides made no effort to keep us from seeing each other. Of course, he would not have recognized *me*, but I had no trouble identifying *him*.

He stopped me as we were passing each other and asked, "Education and orientation?"

I must admit that I was intimidated by being in his presence. "Yes, sir," I responded. He extended his hand, and we exchanged a handshake. Gina and the other guide simply stood aside and let us talk.

"I'll be leaving in a few hours," he said. "How long have you been aboard?"

"Last night, I think," I said hesitatingly. "Wait, let me see. About 20 hours, maybe a little more."

"Well, you have much to learn," he said with a smile. "I've been here about three or four days as far as I can figure out. Isn't it fantastic? What an adventure. I can't wait for the actual meeting between our two peoples."

I was confused. "Wait a minute," I said. "I can drop out of sight for a few days and not be missed because I don't have a public. But how can *you*?"

He chuckled.

"Oh, my wife and I are on vacation in Hawaii. Well, that's where we're supposed to

be," he said with a wink.

"Your wife is with you?" I asked.

"Oh, definitely. We came up together. Now that's what I call a ride," he said with obvious merriment.

I was surprised to learn this in light of what I had been told. What was it they said—only lone individuals were chosen? Of course, there was no longer any need for secrecy, so the policy against multiple abductions to prevent corroboration apparently was no longer operational. That made sense. In fact, corroboration was actually an asset now that the extraterrestrials were about to reveal themselves.

"See you down below," he said as he continued his stroll.

Gina and I resumed our walk down this long, wide corridor.

Actually, according to Gina, unlike the visitor we had just met, many of the potential Ambassadors were not able to disappear for any length of time without arousing great suspicion, or, even worse, alarm that might bring the police or other authorities to investigate. In those situations, it was necessary to return the visitors to their beds each night so they would be available to maintain their public visibility and avoid the appearance of unexplained absences.

This meant, of course, that the POEI program had to be dragged out over a period of several weeks, or even months, depending upon the availability of the selected potential Ambassadors. The Verdants preferred to complete the program in one intensive three- or four-day session, such as the one that I was currently going through, but these extended exercises were simply unavoidable sometimes.

High-profile personages simply did not have the luxury of being able to drop out of sight for unexplained periods of several days. And, of course, the nighttime sessions had to be limited to no more than two or three hours at a time lest the visitors become sleep-deprived and be unable to function properly while pursuing their daytime duties on Earth the following day.

Thus, numerous trips back and forth from their beds to the ship over a period of weeks or months were required before they completed the program.

"What happens if the person doesn't cooperate?" I asked. "Then you've got a very prominent person—not some obscure rancher—who can get a lot of attention and blow your cover if he goes back and starts talking."

"Give us a little credit," she replied. "A thousand years of studying the human species—including its psychological makeup—has given us complete insight into the workings of the human mind. We can predict with 100 percent accuracy how any particular individual will react to any given set of circumstances. We have never made the mistake of bringing anyone aboard who does not fit the profile that we are looking for."

"So there's a particular type that you select?" I asked.

"Of course. Visionaries," she said.

Gina was explaining all of this as we walked, but I had no idea where we were going. We passed many doorways. Some of the doors were open and looked into large rooms with an array of equipment so strange that I wouldn't even be able to describe it. Although there was the usual assortment of electronic consoles, with their peculiar lights, glowing screens, and crazy dials and gauges, most of the gear was so foreign to me that I had never seen anything like it—not even in science fiction movies and TV shows.

"Why aren't we weightless?" I inquired.

Without turning to look at me or breaking stride, Gina said simply, "Artificial gravity."

"What is our position?" I asked. My curiosity was growing with every step.

"I don't think you would understand if I merely told you," she replied.

"Try me," I said.

"You'll see. It's better that I show you."

She turned into one of the open doorways, we walked several hundred feet through the room, came to another doorway, and continued along another corridor. Then we entered another one of those mysterious "elevators," and I got the impression but not really the sensation of "going up." Ten to fifteen seconds passed, and the "elevator" door opened. We stepped out, and the sight that greeted me was so stunning that my knees

actually buckled.

The room was a giant, transparent bubble. The view from an observation tower in a skyscraper would be a distant cousin to what I beheld, because instead of looking down upon a city of lights, we were looking out into the endless cosmos. A billion stellar diamonds sparkled brilliantly upon the black velvet backdrop of space.

The giant ship itself stretched out before us for what seemed to me to be at least a mile, and I watched perhaps half a dozen shuttle craft come and go from several ports along the bow of the superstructure. Large floodlights played across the ship, and a thousand portholes shone with interior lights.

The room we were in was very dark, with just enough light to allow us to keep from bumping into objects or each other. Gina took my hand and led me to a raised circular platform in the middle of the dome, with two steps running around its perimeter. We stepped up to a bank of about 20 plush, upholstered chairs occupying the platform, and she guided me into a seat and took the one next to me.

At the time, I thought that her grip on my hand seemed to be a little tighter than was necessary, that there was—how can I put it?—a certain vague intimacy about it. I immediately dismissed the thought as imagination on my part.

A recessed walkway circled the dome along the transparent walls. The platform was high enough, and the walkway recessed enough, so that anyone standing on the esplanade would be sufficiently low so as not to obstruct the view of those in the seats. As soon as we had settled into our chairs, the interior lights went out completely, but the illumination from outside was bright enough for me to see details in the room, including Gina's profile. It would be useless to try to describe her, because I was incapable of distinguishing one star traveler from another. They all looked alike to me, as if they had been cloned. But I suppose there were distinguishing characteristics that would make each individual recognizable.

About the best analogy I can think of is if a person entered a kennel containing one breed of animal such as a dog or a cat. Assuming that the animals were all of very similar coloration, it would be difficult upon first glance to distinguish one from another. Yet, as

any pet owner knows, the ability to recognize individual animals grows with increased familiarity and exposure to them.

If that were true of these E.T.'s, I had not yet reached the point where I could make such distinctions.

We were essentially in a half-sphere that provided us with a sweeping view of the heavens. Gina used her right hand to toggle a switch that allowed the chairs to swivel 360 degrees. Another switch was activated, and the porthole lights and exterior floodlights that illuminated the ship itself flickered out. Without this corrupting light source, the stars themselves leaped into even more brilliant contrast against the pitch-black of space.

"Did you turn them out?" I asked.

"No, I just accessed a filter to screen out the artificial lights. Only the natural light from the heavens is now visible," she said.

I was mesmerized. Nearby stars, unfiltered by atmosphere, shone in stark contrast against the blackness of the surrounding space with a clarity that I had never experienced on Earth. They were more sharply defined than I could ever imagine. Some were large, maybe two to three times the size of the brightest objects visible in the night sky from Earth, save for the moon.

They ranged from a brilliant glitter many times brighter than any star or planet seen by the naked eye, to mere pinpoints of barely perceptible light. Some were a bit fuzzier, and were actually distant galaxies of millions, perhaps billions, of individual stars. Together, they bathed the room with a level of illumination that was perhaps one-quarter as bright as a moonlit night at home.

It was a spectacle of such beauty that my eyes stung and glistened with emotion. I was literally speechless as I drank in the grandeur of it. But if I was incapable of speaking, Gina showed no signs of being so affected, because she launched into a patter that reminded me of the monotonous recitation of a bored tour guide. I suppose this could be expected. Tour guides and first-time visitors see the Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls with different perspectives.

She rattled off facts and figures like an old pro.

The ship was a medium-size star cruiser, one of scores of thousands in service throughout the universe, designed specifically for monitoring any planet to which it was assigned. This particular one was built 200,000 Earth years ago. Its name, literally translated, was "Goodwill." It was home port to several hundred smaller shuttle craft that are capable of traveling at sub-light speeds to the surface of the planet under observation.

A larger mother ship about 20 times this size is always within close range and is capable of speeding to the monitoring ships within a short period of time, although the distances can be hundreds of trillions of miles of separation. She didn't say if that was in "conventional" travel mode or through those mysterious black holes and things that they had mentioned earlier.

Communication between the cruisers and the mother ship cannot even be explained by a mere Earthling like myself. And I'm not talking about just laymen. I mean that the most brilliant scientific minds on Earth probably would not be able to grasp the principles involved. They are utterly beyond the realm of human experience and comprehension. At least that's what Gina told me. I have to take her word for it.

Simple radio waves for communication are totally unfeasible because of the distances involved. Suffice it to say that some kind of inexplicable energy link exists between the various ships to keep them constantly in touch with one another and the home planet. This link is like a giant umbilical cord of energy that is reeled out as the ship travels through space from its home planet.

It is infinitely elastic, is never broken, and constantly keeps the ship in touch with the home planet no matter how far the craft ventures into the vast reaches of space. To put it in simpler terms, imagine the seafaring ships of old that laid transoceanic telephone cables on the ocean bottoms to connect the continents. The farther they went, the more cable they reeled out, which kept them connected to their home ports.

Whereas it might seem that this connection would be necessary so that the mother ship could speed to the star cruiser in the event of an emergency, that is not the purpose of this system. It is strictly for routine communication, much as the telephone on Earth

keeps family members, friends, business associates, and neighbors in contact with each other.

A constant and voluminous stream of information flows from the various ships throughout the universe to the home planet's Space Exploration Operations Center (SEOC). Almost all of it is of a routine nature. Crews must be rotated and orders forwarded. Monitoring ships must report new planet discoveries. Status reports must be filed. Field assignments must be made. Captains' logs must be transmitted.

All of this information flowing into the central brain center provides the basis for the millions of decisions that must be made. They could be as routine as reassigning a particular star cruiser to another sector or could involve complex matters dealing with the High Command.

Although the mother ships are always nearby, astronomically speaking, the likelihood that any would be required to respond to another ship to deal with an emergency exists only in theory. In reality, there hasn't been an accident or other emergency situation that required such action in several million years. For all practical purposes, the Verdants' technology has virtually eliminated the possibility of any real emergency.

No Verdant spaceships have ever crashed on Earth or on any other planet, Gina said.

"So there's nothing to the Roswell stories?" I asked.

"That was not a Verdant ship," she replied. "Yes, a spacecraft did crash near that New Mexico town in 1948. It belonged to a race of people from a planet in what your astronomers call the Large Magellanic Cloud. That's a galaxy about 200,000 light-years away from Earth and is visible to the naked eye in your Southern Hemisphere."

According to Gina, the ship was a shuttle craft and was on a routine assignment. There was an official investigation by an IFSP board of inquiry, which concluded that the accident was caused by "mortal error," meaning that the pilot made a big mistake. On Earth, if the captain of an airliner made a miscalculation that caused his plane to crash, we would call it "human error."

The starship on which the shuttle craft was based was passing through Earth's solar system for a standard visit to the Goodwill, the ship that I was currently on. The ship had

slowed to sub-light speed travel mode as it was approaching the moon when the Verdants requested that the ship make a stop on Earth in order to pick up some soil and air samples from a nuclear test site in the American Southwest. The Verdant scientists aboard the Goodwill were closely monitoring humankind's emergence into the nuclear age and wanted the samples for tests they were conducting.

Of course, it was understood that the star cruiser itself would not land on Earth but would dispatch a shuttle craft to run the errand. It was a rather routine request, and a subordinate officer was assigned the duty of carrying it out. Unfortunately, this race of people was extremely inexperienced in such tasks because they had been in the IFSP for only a few thousand years.

The subordinate officer himself, who was piloting the shuttle craft, had made no more than two or three landings on any planet except his own. Because this species' home planet has an extremely thin atmosphere, the pilot was not familiar with the heavier type of atmosphere that envelops Earth. He approached Earth too fast and was buffeted out of control when the ship slammed into the surprisingly heavy gaseous envelope.

"He was able to regain some control after a few moments, but not enough to avoid the accident, and he crash-landed," Gina said. "After the board-of-inquiry hearing, steps were put into effect to ensure that such an event would not be repeated. The alien bodies were recovered by your military. Naturally, we were concerned that mass hysteria could ensue, but thanks to the military mind and its proclivity for secrecy, that was avoided."

The military put such a tight lid of secrecy on the event that even the highest civilian authorities of the land were never informed of the discovery. When questioned by members of Congress and the President, the military brass completely denied the story. All military personnel who had any knowledge whatsoever of the event were sworn to secrecy and denial. Violation of the order carried an automatic and immediate death sentence from which there was no appeal. No courts would be involved, no hearings, no trial. Just simple assassination with dispatch, she told me.

Eventually, the incident became a non-event. It simply never happened officially.

"So no current government leaders have any knowledge of your presence in our

neighborhood?" I asked.

"None," she replied. "Does that answer all of your questions?"

I said it did, and she continued her tour-guide monologue.

Chapter Seven

On with the Tour

The Goodwill is disk-shaped, thinner along the rim, and increasingly thicker toward the center. I was wrong in my initial estimate in which it seemed to stretch out for at least a mile in every direction. In reality, Gina said, it has a radius of about three-quarters of a mile, or a diameter of about a mile and a half. It has 16 decks along the outer rim, which is about 200 feet thick at that point, and gradually rises to its highest point of 234 decks, or about 3,000 feet thick, in the center.

That is, through its latitudinal axis, there are 8 decks below and 8 above on the rim, ranging to the center point of 117 decks below and 117 above the centerline.

There are 32,000 personnel aboard, most of them scientists who conduct the studies of the planet under observation. Computers, of course, run the entire ship, so it requires only a handful of crew members to oversee its operation.

The shuttle craft are equally saucer-shaped, and, yes, these have ventured to Earth and have been sighted, although efforts are made to keep sightings to a minimum. They have landed on occasion in remote, unpopulated areas during certain science missions to take samples of air, water, soil, and animal and plant matter.

Although literally thousands of sightings have been reported over the years, only a very tiny fraction of those were legitimate, I was told. The vast majority were simply misinterpretations of natural phenomena, many were the products of overactive imaginations, and some were outright frauds staged by pranksters.

The cruiser is never visible from Earth because it always keeps itself positioned on the far side of the moon in a direct line with Earth.

This I had to see.

"Where?" I asked. "Where's the moon?"

"If you got on the walkway and looked down in relation to the orientation of the ship—that is, toward your feet—you'd be looking at it," Gina said. "But you won't see much."

"Why?"

"Because the Earth is in a full-moon phase, which means that we are facing the night side of it. The day side is facing Earth."

That made sense. That also explained why the ship was bathed in floodlights rather than illuminated by sunlight. We were in the moon's shadow. In a couple of weeks, when the moon had orbited halfway around the Earth, the ship would be in full sunlight. Then the day side of the moon would be facing the ship, and the night side would be facing the Earth. I thought I understood.

But back to the shuttle craft. Because they are unlikely to be seen, they venture out from behind the moon where they can look out upon Earth and serve as satellites for the transporter beams that are used to bring up people. The beam originates from the starship, is bounced off the shuttle craft, and is deflected to Earth's surface. There the beam is focused on the intended target, who is then transported up.

I had been listening to Gina with one ear, but my mind was primarily occupied with the incredible panorama that stretched out before me for billions of light-years. I just couldn't seem to get enough of it. I tried to imagine all of the magnificent wonders that existed out there. But surely they must be of such stunning proportions as to be unimaginable.

Thousands of advanced civilizations. What were their cities like? Did they even have cities as I envisioned them? Besides their obvious technological marvels, what were the "people"—if that's what they could be called—like? Did they have family structures similar to that of humankind? What remarkable forms did their music and art take? Or

did they have music and art?

What forms did the species themselves come in? Were they mostly humanoid or some variation thereof? What unknown wonders were still undiscovered, things that the Verdants themselves hadn't even come across?

I would pick one part of the sky and try to visualize billions of intelligent creatures going about their everyday lives at that very moment. What would it be like to walk through one of their cities or residential neighborhoods? It was beyond mind-numbing. It was totally incomprehensible. My God, I had such an unquenchable yearning. *It's not fair*, I thought. *So much to see, to know, to learn, to experience, and human lives are so infuriatingly short.*

Gina's prattle eventually wound down. We spent long periods of time in silence, she sitting quietly while I drank in the spectacle, mesmerized. Hours passed.

The reverie was broken when the muted lights came back on and she announced that it was time for us to get back.

About four hours had passed since we had begun the tour. That meant I had been aboard for 23 or 24 hours, a full Earth day, making it about 1:30 or 2:30 in the morning on Thursday.

Gina took my hand to lead me down off the platform, and again I got the uneasy feeling that there was more to her touch than mere guidance. It was warm, about the same as a human hand, quite thin, and I could feel the sharpness of the bones and tendons under the soft flesh. We retraced our steps, and I was soon alone in my quarters. I groomed myself, slipped out of my robe, and lay on the bed in my underwear, giving momentary consideration to turning on the TV.

As I drifted off to sleep, I thought about an earlier meeting with Gus, who had visited me in my quarters while I was lunching alone during one of the periodic breaks between sessions in the boardroom.

Chapter Eight

The Verdant "War" Machine

!! What's up?" I had asked Gus.

"Remember when you asked me if I had ever been in a fight? I want to talk to you about that. The answer is yes, I have been in many fights. But I have never drawn blood, nor have I ever inflicted pain or injury upon another living creature. No Verdant has for eons."

"A neat trick," I said. "Just how do you fight somebody without bloodying his nose or getting your own bloodied?"

"Do you play chess?" he asked.

"Just barely," I said.

"How would you describe a chess match?"

"Well, let's see," I said. "I guess you could say that chess is a civilized game played by cultured ladies and gentlemen matching wits."

"Partly right," Gus said. "Chess is a game played by cultured people pretending to be engaged in a gentlemanly contest of intellect but whose real purpose is to outwit their opponent to such a humiliating and degrading point where the rival will never speak to them again. It is barbaric, and yet no noses are bloodied, as you say."

"Remind me not to play chess with you," I said.

"If there is only one message that you take back to your people," Gus continued, "it is imperative that they understand that the Verdants are a peaceful race, completely and totally lacking in aggressive tendencies. We are not conquerors or warriors. Your people must understand that. They must not fear us."

However, in the early stages of their development, the Verdants did have some preliminary aggressive tendencies, he said. Archeological finds and fossil records indicate that some Verdant individuals died of wounds that could only have been inflicted by primitive weapons such as clubs and crude stone knives.

In addition, even their earliest recorded history shows vestiges of internecine conflict, although such destructive activities have been a thing of the past for eons. No Verdant warship has ever been built, let alone gone into space. There are no Verdant armed forces, and there have not been any for several million years. The only weapons of destruction exist in Verdant museums.

"Not even defensive weapons?" I asked. "What happens if you come across a warlike species that is already in space before you discover them? How would you defend yourselves?"

"‘Absolute intelligence’ is the ultimate weapon against which there is no adequate defense, even by the most aggressive and advanced military power," he said.

He didn't explain the term, but it seemed self-explanatory. I imagined that "absolute intelligence" meant exactly that—the absolute limit where no intellectual improvement is possible. This definition would be confirmed later.

I thought I had him there. Maybe I could beat him at chess after all. I mentally moved my queen to put him in check.

"Ah, but what happens if this armed and ferocious species also has achieved absolute intelligence?" I asked. "Now you're facing an enemy that is as intelligent as you, but he has a weapon and you have none. Doesn't that put you at a disadvantage?"

"A contradiction in terms," he replied.

Species resort to war and conflict when they lack the intellect to resolve their differences through peaceful means, Gus told me. Once absolute intelligence is achieved, use of force to settle disputes is out of the question because it is a tool of the ignorant and the inferior. Therefore, it is impossible to meet a warlike species with absolute intelligence. The two qualities are mutually exclusive.

"That is, if a species is warlike, it has not achieved absolute intelligence. If it has achieved absolute intelligence, it cannot be warlike," Gus explained.

"You said you've been in bloodless fights before," I said. "What did you mean?"

In their explorations of the universe, the Verdants have on occasion encountered heavily armed hostile species that have already become star travelers by the time they are

discovered, Gus said. Without relying upon military weapons, the Verdants surreptitiously move their chess pieces into place and proceed to force the aggressive species out of space and back to their home planets. They become effectively isolated and neutralized until such time as the species evolve to the point where they can be safely absorbed into the IFSP.

"I don't see how you can do that," I said.

"They have their guns, we have our wits," he replied.

He told of one particular situation several thousand years ago when he himself was commanding an exploration starship and came upon two species in a distant galaxy that were involved in interstellar warfare.

"Make no mistake, they were very intelligent and possessed weapons powerful enough to obliterate a planet such as Earth with one strike. Your military has nothing that could defend against them," he said. "But the two opponents were equally matched, so neither one was able to strike a lethal blow against the other. For every offensive weapon, the other side had a matching defensive one. There were millions of casualties, of course, but no decisive winning blow was struck by either side. The war simply went on and on."

"So what happened?" I asked.

"I checkmated them," he said.

Gus had summoned a cadre of volunteers through the High Command, and within several months he had placed 10,000 Verdants on each planet who had been genetically altered and disguised to pass as members of the two species. Because of their supreme intelligence, the *faux* fifth columnists worked their way into positions of great power and authority within an accelerated time frame.

They became heads of military units, key scientists, government leaders, and chief executives of industrial complexes, including armament manufacturers. Through sabotage, subterfuge, misdirection, persuasion over great masses of the host populations, and careful manipulation of government policy, the means to make war on each side quickly deteriorated.

Great interstellar warships mysteriously malfunctioned. Satellites fell from the skies. Communications broke down. Weapons of destruction emerged from the factories woefully flawed and failed in combat. Finger-pointing and blame-laying led to heated bickering as the social fabric began to unravel. It got to the point where each side's starship fleets became grounded.

Scientifically, both species were set back a thousand years and became incapable of even launching a communications or weather satellite that would stay in orbit for more than a few hours. The volunteer Verdants were repatriated, and Gus moved observation ships into orbit around both planets and simply isolated the species.

Key civilian and military authorities from Earth who have been selected as Ambassadors have been extensively briefed on the nature of the Verdant approach to maintaining interstellar peace. They will be very helpful in calming any fears among Earth's population as to the Verdants' intentions.

"But there will be resistance," Gus said rather ominously.

I looked at him questioningly.

"From whom?" I asked. "Who would be against peace?"

"People who thrive on conflict," he replied.

He said that the military Ambassadors have been selected almost exclusively from what is known on Earth as the Free World. Representatives from repressive regimes have been virtually excluded because they cannot pass muster as good candidates to serve on the transition teams.

While the Verdants do not interfere in the internal affairs of any species on their home planets, they do have strict regulations in matters involving the stellar community with regard to weapons. They are not tolerated, period. The cardinal rule is that space is only for the peaceful.

The greatest stumbling block that humankind faces in its transition to a society of star travelers will be dealing with and overcoming that element of society that has traditionally dealt in violence and that has the most to lose when swords are beaten into plowshares, he said. In this group he included arms manufacturers and dealers, and petty

tyrants who will be dethroned.

When contact has been firmly made, social and cultural changes will begin taking effect, and it is anticipated that the vast numbers of peace-loving people throughout the world will begin dismantling military forces as one of their first orders of business. If no weapons are allowed in space, there will become, most likely, a concurrent intolerance for devices of destruction on Earth, Gus told me.

Those who can be expected to resist any change in the status quo will be authoritative and dangerous people, the vast majority of them males, whose power bases are threatened as the forces of peace sweep the world. But he offered a prediction. Isolated from the interplanetary community, the brutes of the world will also become increasingly isolated on Earth. Eventually, they will no longer be any match for their more peaceful brethren, who will become overwhelmingly empowered as they take their places in the federation of star travelers.

It was an encouraging thought.

Chapter Nine

The Magical Thumb

I awoke naturally, totally refreshed. I would learn that I had slept 7 hours, which meant I had been aboard the ship perhaps 30 or 31 hours, according to my calculations. So it would be somewhere between 8 and 10 o'clock on Thursday morning. I went through the usual bathroom ritual and changed into clean clothing.

I indulged myself with some after-shave lotion and cologne that I slapped on lavishly. I even helped myself to some of the skin lotion, rubbing it vigorously into my hands, arms, and face.

Gus and two others were in the room when I exited the bathroom, which by now came as no surprise to me. There was also the food cart, heaped with more variety than I could possibly hope to consume in a week, even if I did eat more than my usual portions now that I knew it wasn't going to affect my waistline.

I ate a hearty breakfast with gusto, but I did exercise enough control to avoid satiating myself to the point of sickness. I wondered what they did with the excess. Afterward we returned to the boardroom.

We took our seats, and the "orientation and education" resumed.

The pattern continued like that for the next 40 or so hours—the questions and answers, the long explanations, the continuous stream of information that was fed to me in college classroom-type lectures and discourses. The sessions would last for four to six hours, punctuated by meal and bathroom breaks, at least for me. There was one other

longer break in which I slept for eight hours, meaning that I had two full nights' sleep during my three days aboard. These would equate to Wednesday and Thursday nights at home.

In the initial stages of the study of Earth, the human species was classified as borderline, one that quite possibly would have to be confined to its home planet. While the human animal was not considered anywhere near as vicious or ferocious as some of the worst species that the Verdants had come across, its warlike tendencies were cause for some concern.

The human species, I was told, is the most diverse that the Verdants had ever encountered. Such diversity is a rarity in the universe of civilized beings, and although the Verdants have come to expect the unexpected, this came as a mild surprise to them.

Until they discovered humans, they had never encountered a species in which there were wide character variations between individuals in the group. That is, a species might be good or evil, or any gradation in between, but never good *and* evil existing side by side in the same species. Additionally, each individual was a microcosm of the whole.

"That meant that we could judge the character of an entire civilization by simply studying one individual," Tom said. "If we found a moral individual, the species itself as well as all other individuals were moral. Where we came across barbarians, the species invariably turned out to be barbaric."

However, discovery of human beings—and the infinite variations in character that constitute the species—threw a monkey wrench into that formula.

"Never before had we seen cruel and remorseless individuals exist side by side with kind and compassionate ones within the same species," Tom said. "Destructive and murderous people walk among the caring ones on Earth. Tyrannical governments rule over peaceful and gentle people, while immoral people exist under benevolent governments. This phenomenon—this range of diversity among humans—is absolutely fascinating."

They came to understand that humans not only vary from individual to individual, but also between individuals and the group as a whole. It took some time for the Verdants to

make these distinctions.

"Your long history of warfare—which we have personally observed—told us that we were looking at a savage race," Tom continued. "On the group level we witnessed international conflict, corruption, thievery, the rape of the environment, the plunder of natural resources, and the unspeakable cruelty of genocide. On an individual level, we observed mendacity, thievery, murder, child abuse, hypocrisy, sadism, and cowardice of epidemic proportions."

All of these things spoke of a depraved species, Tom explained. But closer scrutiny revealed individual accomplishments in the arts, music, literature, and architecture that demonstrated a surprising nobility of spirit and mind. It was these redeeming qualities that caused the Verdants to change their minds.

Humankind's status was upgraded to "acceptable" after the Verdant scientists had enough data to confidently predict that the species could safely be welcomed into the intergalactic community—with certain reservations.

So, it wouldn't be a stretch to say that humankind will find its place in the heavens thanks to the refined, intelligent, gentle, cultured people who walk among us. It was their contributions that caught the Verdants' attention and convinced them that the species was worth nurturing.

This nurturing of the human species presented a unique challenge, they said—one that they had never faced before. Typically, when helping to prepare other species to make the transition from planet-bound animal to star traveler, the Verdants simply shared their technology with the entire civilized species.

But that formula won't work because of humankind's unrivaled diversity. The goal, in this case, is to preserve the redeeming qualities in the species while ensuring that the darker elements of the human character—personified by the dangerous rogues of society—are isolated. In other words, to resort to a platitude, they wouldn't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

That is, the better nature of humankind, represented by the gentle people, the artists, the thinkers, the lovers, the dreamers, the scholars, the builders, the hundreds of millions

of moral people who live ordinary lives of decency, would be welcomed into the intergalactic federation. But there would be no place in the cosmos for the wicked and immoral—those who by their very words and deeds on Earth have demonstrated that they are not fit candidates for membership in the cosmic community.

One good example of those to be excluded would be leaders of governments whose record on human rights falls short of minimum standards.

The Verdants have decided that the best approach to achieve these goals is to encourage the good people of Earth to police themselves, to take responsibility for ensuring that dangerous scoundrels are quarantined and not allowed access to the heavens. Any failure in this regard could lead to loss of privileges for the entire species. This could mean being forced back out of space until such time as humankind demonstrates that it has resolved the problem and can keep the troublemakers restricted to the planet.

"How does humankind rate overall in comparison to the norm among the various species in the planetary community?" I asked.

"Taking the top 80 percent of the population and discounting the other 20 percent, whom we consider irredeemable, man is inherently good," the one called Robert replied. "When the species takes its place in the federation, it will consist solely of that top 80 percent."

"And the bottom 20 percent?" I asked, leaving the question hanging.

Several moments of silence passed before several of the extraterrestrials started speaking at once. Gus decided to field the question, and the others deferred to him.

"We do not deal in cruelty or death, nor do we inflict pain," he said. "But we also do not tolerate dangerous rogues who cannot or will not abide by the standards and rules of civilized society."

He was speaking, of course, about the intergalactic community because, as I had been told earlier, they do not interfere in the internal affairs of other species.

"I think we should leave it at that," he said.

I interpreted the latter statement not as a suggestion, but as a directive, so I exercised

discretion and dropped the subject.

In terms of native intelligence, humankind rates at about a 2, certainly no higher than on 3, on a scale of 1 to 10 when compared with other species when they are first brought into the IFSP, Robert continued. I was extremely disappointed with that assessment, and I suppose my face showed it.

"But that will improve," he said. "It always does."

Left alone, he said, the human species would require another two million years, according to the best estimates of the Verdants' scientists, to achieve absolute intelligence.

There was that phrase again.

"Absolute intelligence," I said. It was really a question.

"The point at which it becomes biologically impossible to become any more intelligent. There are limits to everything," Robert said.

But, again, he pointed out, the relatively low rating of a 2 or 3 on a scale of 1 to 10 is due to the immense diversity of the human species. Most other species have intelligence levels that do not deviate more than one percent from the most intelligent to the least intelligent individuals. For all practical purposes, except for very slight variations, that means that every individual is of equal intelligence.

"If we compared just your most intelligent people—say the top 10 percent—your species would rank at perhaps an 8 or a 9," Robert continued. "But the sheer vast numbers of the less intelligent draw down the average considerably. Again, this is an anomaly that we had never experienced before. We previously had thought that it would be impossible to find such a wide difference among individuals in the same species."

However, with the proper guidance provided by the available technology, man will not have to wait for two million years to achieve absolute intelligence. The process can be speeded up enormously so that a race of humans of super intelligence can be created within no more than two or three thousand years.

In terms of physical appearance, man is neither more attractive nor less attractive than any other species. Humans simply are viewed as a species with unique characteristics,

just as every other species brings to the planetary community its own unique physiology.

Most of the space beings are what could be described as anthropoid in form, although with great variations. But despite these vast differences in appearance between the species that do evolve into space travelers, they all have at least two physical features in common, I was told. One is the ability to grasp with enough dexterity to make tools.

In humans, and these E.T.'s themselves, that would be the fingers with the appposable thumb. From this amazing anatomical feature come the tools that lead to mining, manufacturing, agriculture, and dominance over fire. All of these things eventually lead to outer space.

There are some pretty strange—at least from my perspective—creatures out there, based upon descriptions that I heard. For instance, not all of the grasping appendages are necessarily of the human type. Some star travelers have dual prehensile organs that are every bit as efficient as the human hand. Even the elephant, with its dexterous trunk, has the physical ability to perform simple grasping chores, although it lacks the intelligence to take full advantage of that faculty. The trunk does fall short, though, of the fuller range of refined movement that the human hand possesses. It can pick up a peanut, but it cannot operate a pair of pliers.

Also, even if the trunk were as adroit as the human hand, the elephant's massive body itself presents an insurmountable barrier to the dexterity required to become builders of cities. In other words, the grasping hand is vital, but it is useless if the rest of the body is incompatible.

That brings us to the second major feature that all star travelers share. The body must be capable of the mobility required to transcend its native environment. It's hard to imagine an elephant climbing a ladder into the business end of a space capsule. The elephant, in fact, is the only Earth land animal that cannot get all of its feet off the ground at one time.

In other cases, I was told, there are species that have developed super intelligence through evolution, but their bodies are not compatible with that intelligence to allow them to make and use tools or to travel outside of their restricted environment.

The Verdants have discovered many creatures, including those on Earth, that cannot live outside of water. Because they are swimmers, they have not developed the physical ability to manipulate their environment in order to mine, to forge, to farm, to manufacture, or to weave clothing. Naturally, familiarity with fire is totally out of the question. And yet some of these creatures have great intelligence whereby they have spoken languages, understand mathematics, and form abstract thoughts.

The Verdants have determined that certain Earth marine species, specifically whales and dolphins, will eventually arrive at that point if current evolutionary processes are not disturbed. But in their present form, even if they developed the intelligence, they will be restricted to the oceans and therefore excluded from the astral community. The body itself is a prison. Of course, that could change through some as-yet unforeseen evolutionary mutation.

As for reproduction, some species in the intergalactic federation give birth to live young, while others lay eggs. There is at least one species that produces several identical offspring during the adult's 100-year life span through an internal cloning mechanism . This species has no sex.

The offspring then internally clone offspring identical to themselves when they reach adulthood, which are identical to their parent, and their parent before them. In effect, the population basically consists of one "person" in millions of bodies. This is as close to physical immortality as the Verdants have ever come across.

Fortunately for this species, the evolution into a cloning organism did not occur until it had achieved a very high level of intelligence. Had this process occurred earlier in the evolutionary cycle, the species would not have made it to the stars. That stands to reason simply because a clone is an exact duplicate of its donor. There can be no improvement from one generation to the next.

If it had started cloning itself earlier in its history, all progress would have stopped at that point. Stupid is as stupid does, as the saying goes.

Chapter Ten

The World to Come

“This is so fantastic,” I blurted out at one point in a moment of unrestrained enthusiasm. “I just can’t imagine what life on Earth is going to be like in 100 years, 1,000 years.”

“Well, it’s certainly going to be different,” the one called George said.

“Please,” I said, “tell me what it’s going to be like. I know I won’t be around to see it myself, but I have such a yearning to know, to understand.”

And then a strange thing happened. I don’t know if it was fatigue from the long hours of absorbing information, or if the full impact of the experience finally took hold in my psyche, but I was overcome with emotion, and I felt that I was on the verge of weeping. I hung my head to conceal my misting eyes. I was choked up and did not speak for fear that my voice would crack. I felt ashamed, but composure eluded me for a full minute.

The Verdants themselves simply waited until the episode passed and I was able to collect myself.

“There is no need to be embarrassed,” George finally said. “You are simply grieving. That very human emotion is quite normal under the circumstances.”

“Grieving?” I asked. “Grieving for what, for whom?”

“For a missed opportunity,” he replied. “You are glimpsing the glorious future, and you are aware that it is tantalizingly just beyond your grasp. And because of that you are angry and frustrated and you feel cheated. But that is the nature of life.”

He was right, of course. Oh, how I wished that I could have been born a century later. But wishing wasn't going to make it happen, and I had to deal with the reality of here and now.

"Tell me what it will be like," I pleaded.

"We can't predict the future," George continued. "No one can. But based upon our experiences, we can, with great accuracy, tell you what can be expected in general terms."

Humankind will take its place in the Intergalactic Federation of Sovereign Planets sometime early in the 21st century if all goes according to the established timetable, the Verdants told me.

In the short run, in the first 100 years after that event, great strides will be made on the road to curing the ills that have plagued the species from the time that humankind took its first halting footsteps upon Earth. These will not just be physical ailments, but afflictions of the spirit and social order as well.

Many diseases of the body will be conquered, intelligence levels will rise, poverty will start to disappear, common courtesy and civility will flourish, nations will begin to consider war unthinkable, crime will plummet, and other antisocial behavior will wane.

But progress does not happen overnight, and it will be several centuries before humankind achieves what today would be considered utopia.

Within 1,000 years, humankind will have been transformed. Great spaceships will be exploring the stars. In the absence of poverty and sickness, and war and crime, complete individual happiness will be a universal reality. Illiteracy will be but a notation in the history books. Life spans will have increased dramatically. Every citizen of Earth will have any creature comfort necessary to live satisfying and rewarding lives of peace and contentment.

There will be abundance in the land, and every living person will share in it.

The air and water of Earth will be as pristine and pure as it was before man's ancestors began to befoul them. The rain forests will be restored, the rivers and oceans cleansed. Keys and locks will become a thing of the past, as will police forces and theft

insurance, for no person would even consider stealing another person's property or engaging in any other form of antisocial behavior. People will move about the world in great ultramodern vehicles without concern for their personal safety or security.

National armed forces will have disappeared as unfathomable relics of an insane past.

The Verdants went on and on, painting a magnificent word picture of a world that I was incapable of visualizing.

"I'm dumbfounded," I said. "It's incomprehensible to me. How—what processes can bring such revolutionary changes? You're essentially talking about the restructuring of human nature as I know it."

"It's really not all that complicated," George said.

I got the feeling that this particular alien, because he was doing most of the talking on this subject, might have been the designated expert on human psychology.

"As we told you earlier, the human species has been assessed as being essentially moral and worthy of nurturing. Think about it. Without exception, all of the mischief in your world is and has been the handiwork of a small percentage of your population. We judge that element to be about 20 percent of the total."

No longer would that minority of troublemakers run roughshod over the world's population, making war and committing crimes against people and property. Tyrants and criminals, both of the street-thug and white-collar variety, will be isolated from the mainstream and effectively rendered incapable of inflicting their rascality upon the innocent masses.

Such isolation would not take the form of prisons as we know them today, but rather a benign and compassionate separation from the main body of decent people in which they will live out their lives in comfortable seclusion. Naturally, they will not have the option of reproducing, I was told.

"Who will oversee these changes?" I asked. "Will the Verdants become the rulers of Earth?"

"Oh, not at all," George replied. "Mankind will maintain complete and sovereign control over its own destiny. We will merely offer you guidance, which you will be free

to accept or reject. But based upon our experiences with other alien species, we fully expect that the lessons you learn from us will lead to a hastened social evolution as you apply our teachings to deal with your human problems. It will be a totally natural process."

I may have touched a nerve, because one of the star travelers made it a point to assure me that, while the Verdants are the dominant species in the known universe, the only species that has colonized other worlds, they are not rulers. Every species, he said, is an equal part of the whole. There is no superpower, as such. Every world maintains its sovereignty while participating equally in the intergalactic community.

Earth and humankind will share a similar status.

Chapter Eleven

Indecent Proposal

There had been three sessions, with breaks in between, over the previous ten hours. Hour 40 had passed. It would be about 6 or 7 P.M. Thursday at home. I ate my "evening" meal, got cleaned up, and slapped a generous sprinkling of cologne onto my face. I wasn't yet ready to settle down to bed, so I asked Gina for another cook's tour.

We peeked in on the engine control room, which was surprisingly small considering the size of the ship itself. I saw only three other travelers, who I presumed were crew members. It was pretty boring, just a typical computer clean room. I had misunderstood, thinking that we were actually going to the engine room. This was just the brain center for the engines, which I was told were inaccessible to me.

From there we went to the navigation center and then toured one of the flight decks from which the shuttle craft depart and arrive. Each deck serves one shuttle craft exclusively, and the one assigned to this port was berthed there when we arrived. I was astounded by its size. It was huge, much larger than any aircraft I had seen on Earth.

I had seen several of them from afar, illuminated by the star cruiser's floodlights, when I was in the observation dome with Gina during my first tour, but they were only toys on the horizon, and it was difficult at that distance to estimate their true size. She took me into the craft, and it reminded me of the mammoth ballrooms that graced old ocean liners such as the Queen Mary, minus the massive crystal chandeliers and winding staircases, of course. But it certainly had been designed to provide physical comfort to its

occupants.

I expected the cockpit area to contain more dials than would be found on a 747 jumbo jet, but it was surprisingly uncluttered. There seemed to be just a few simple controls facing the two pilot seats. There was no windshield as we know it, but rather a very large rectangular viewing screen. Data from sensors on the outer shell of the ship faithfully reproduced the outside view on the screen, Gina said.

The craft normally carried a crew of 20 to 30 and was equipped with enough food, fuel, and other supplies to enable it to be self-sustaining for up to a full Earth year at a time.

Afterward, we wandered to one of the crew dining areas, which didn't make much of an impression on me. I guess if you've seen one mess hall you've seen them all. The Verdants are strictly herbivores and are actually incapable of digesting meat or meat products. Plant matter is grown aboard the ship hydroponically, and a ton of ripened vegetation can be processed into a package weighing no more than a pound and preserved indefinitely. To prepare it for eating, it is reconverted in the galley to its original weight and is as fresh as the moment it was harvested.

One meal for the entire crew requires 50 pounds of the processed food, which becomes 50 tons when reconverted. The Verdants eat but one meal in a 36-hour cycle.

This part of the tour was pretty humdrum, and I fully expected Gina to take me to the sleeping quarters next. Surprise, surprise, there are no sleeping quarters, I was told, because the Verdants don't sleep as we know it. They have rest areas, lounges, recreation areas, and places for quiet moments of relaxation. But they consider sleep an abbreviated form of death and a terrible waste of time. Through technology, they eliminated the need for sleep millions of years earlier.

They do enjoy their rest periods, however, which essentially are of a social and recreational nature.

"After all," Gina said, "the whole purpose of life is to enjoy it."

And what brings them joy?

"Our greatest pleasure comes from exploration and learning," she said. "They are as

important to the enjoyment of life as are the physical gratifications. Of course, we delight in many of the same things that you find enjoyable. In some respects, we are very much alike despite our vast differences."

"Such as?" I asked.

"A good meal—"

"That processed plant food?" I interrupted. "You like that?"

"Did you enjoy your meals?" she asked. "Well, every dish that you were offered was made from it. Of course, it was tailored to your limited tastes. We have an endless variety of dishes, more than you could ever imagine, which are even more pleasing to our palates."

When I stick my foot in my mouth, I really open wide.

"Like you, we also enjoy good conversation...good friends. Sex," she added.

The word was hanging by itself, set apart from the other examples that she had cited. I turned to look at her, but her face, as usual, said nothing.

Sex is engaged in almost exclusively for pleasure because each female is genetically incapable of producing more than one offspring in her 20,000-year life span. Of course, science can circumvent that restriction, but it rarely does.

Verdants are quite capable of reproducing scientifically outside the confines of the body, she said. And for a brief period in their history they did procreate in the laboratory, as it were. But they have rejected that process—not for any moral reasons or because they consider it unnatural—but because they simply find that they suffer a loss of fulfillment when they procreate artificially. So now they continue to reproduce biologically as nature intended from the day they began to evolve.

Gina could not recall any instances in her lifetime when a female had a baby under any but natural circumstances.

"But what if there is a miscarriage, or the baby is born with a severe defect that threatens its life?" I asked.

"That does not happen," she said. "All children are born perfect, strong, and healthy. And they are all equally intelligent, as are all adults."

We had been walking, turning into doorways, riding elevators and trams while we talked, and after about ten minutes we arrived in a small, rather intimate lounge area. It was unlike the large lounge-recreation rooms that I had seen up until then. Whereas there might have been 60 or 70 E.T.'s in one of the larger rooms, engaging in quiet conversation, playing what appeared to be board games, or just sitting in lounge chairs and looking out of the fairly good-size viewing ports into the blackness of space, this room held only a few lounge chairs and was unoccupied at the time, save for ourselves.

Again with the hand, I thought, as she guided me into one of the chairs and took a seat next to me.

The Verdants have achieved such "absolute intelligence" that they know there is no way to travel faster, to live longer, to build more perfect ships, to make any new advances in their own civilizations, she continued. That is why one of their great satisfactions is to explore, to learn, to find new wonders in the universe.

"You cannot imagine the thrill, the excitement to come upon an unknown planet, an unknown life form," Gina said. "We never become jaded, no matter how many times before we have experienced it. It is just the sheer rapture of discovery."

"I guess I can't understand because it has never happened to me," I responded. "But what happens in the distant future when all of the planets and stars and galaxies have been explored? When you have nothing new to find or to learn? Will your lives lose meaning, then?"

"Oh, but that can't happen," she said. "Stars and planets are being formed faster than we have the capacity to discover and explore them. That's the wonderful thing about nature. But even if did occur, life is still good and wonderful and offers so many other rewards. We would simply content ourselves in other pursuits."

"In fact," she continued, "the vast majority of our lives are spent on our worlds, not out in space. We find fulfillment in many ways."

There was just a momentary pause, and then:

"How often do you have sex?" The question came right out of left field and startled me. I visibly winced.

I explained that I was married and that gentlemen do not discuss their intimate relationships in public. But to give her some kind of a satisfactory response, I said that the human male goes through several stages of sexual appetite. After the onset of puberty, I said, rapid hormonal changes bring the typical male to the peak of his sexual appetite within a few years. At that point, I explained, the male is capable of copulating daily, and on occasion even several times a day for short periods.

After that peak period, I suppose, until probably mid-life, the average married man probably would have sexual relations several times a week, I told Gina. Frequency then continues to diminish with advanced age.

"Why do you have wives?" she asked.

"I don't know, we just do," I said. "The family unit is the nucleus of our social order."

"We don't have wives. We find it dreary to stay with one partner for a lifetime. The central nervous system becomes accustomed to the stimulus of one partner and fails to respond with the same degree of intensity as it does on first contact," she said.

"Well, you wouldn't have a wife, anyway. You'd have a husband," I pointed out.

"Don't you get bored with just one partner?" Gina asked.

"There are other reasons for being married," I said. "The primary one is love, which encompasses many things, including companionship. We find fulfillment, a sense of security and spiritual comfort, in belonging to one special person. There is the joy of raising children that two people create. Lots of reasons."

"Do you lose interest in other females when you are married, then?" she asked.

"It's not a matter of losing interest; it's a matter of devoting yourself to your chosen partner."

"So you can still be sexually stimulated by a female who isn't your wife?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you allow yourself that pleasure?"

"Lots of men do," I responded. "But it's a violation of trust. When two people marry, they promise to be faithful to each other. Lots of men and women break that promise. Mostly men, I think. I'm not judging them. It's just the way they are."

"You didn't tell me if you get bored with the same partner."

"One becomes comfortable in marriage."

"You don't want to talk about your personal life, and I am not getting answers. Let's talk hypothetically. Which would stimulate a human male's central nervous system more—having sex with a partner who has been with him half of his lifetime, or reaching between the legs of a desirable female that he has never known?"

I practically gasped at this frankness.

"Which would be more exciting?" she persisted.

I told her that I was tired and that I would like to return to my quarters.

"They call me a sexperimenter."

Well, that's what it would translate to in English, she told me. If she said it in her language, I wouldn't even be able to repeat it because I don't have the necessary vocal range. The word is not applied as a label of moral judgment by her colleagues, but simply describes someone who has sex with selected other species in an attempt to discover new sensations, new stimulations.

She said there are a considerable number like her among her species.

It was at that point that she stood up, let her robe fall to the floor, and asked as she stood naked: "Do you want to do it?"

I don't know if any other human being had ever witnessed this sight before—although I cannot remember ever reading about any abductee who reported a similar experience.

Surprisingly, her body was not as dramatically different anatomically as one might expect to find under these circumstances.

One obvious feature, or lack thereof: There was no pubic hair.

The vagina was quite similar to a human woman's genitalia, although the vulva might have been just a bit fuller. The breasts were of the size that, had this been a human, would be described as petite, perhaps the size of lemons. They also seemed to be slightly higher on the chest than that of the human female.

She slowly turned and posed, much as a female body builder might do on stage. I was shocked, stunned, and embarrassed, but I must admit that I was also entranced and I

continued to stare.

The buttocks were again proportional to the size of the body when compared with humans. She did not have a discernible navel.

This display lasted about a minute, and then she began a strange, animated dance of sorts, an obvious sexual ritual.

I don't mean to be unkind, because from what I had already learned about my hosts, they were compassionate, gentle beings, but the truth of the matter is that I considered the idea of sexual relations with any of them to be repulsive. It had nothing to do with Gina as an individual. It's just that I equated such a suggested relationship as akin to bestiality.

In other words, I would be no more likely to be sexually attracted to one of these creatures than to a dog or a horse—which I could love as magnificent creatures with distinct personalities—but not as sexual objects. And since I am totally devoid of such perverse proclivities, I had no interest or desire whatsoever to "do it" with her.

She obviously got the message, and she slipped back into her robe.

"No need to be embarrassed," she said, again correctly reading my discomfiture. We returned to my quarters, and I climbed into bed. About four or five hours had passed since I had begun the tour with Gina, which meant I had been aboard for roughly 44 or 45 hours. That would make it shortly before midnight on Thursday night at home. I slept fitfully.

Chapter Twelve

Gina

During my stay on the great ship, there had been several times when Gina and I had the opportunity to engage in intimate conversations lasting from a few minutes to several hours. I was very curious about her, and once I suddenly asked: "Who are you?"

She turned to look at me, and I could *sense*, more than actually *perceive*, her questioning gaze.

"I'm not sure I understand," she said.

"Do you know how to pretend?" I asked.

"Yes, I think so. It's like a game of sorts, isn't it?"

"Right. A game," I said. "Let's pretend that you are a human female and that I have just met you at a cocktail party on Earth. I walk up to you and introduce myself because I am interested in you."

"Oh, right, one of your quaint little mating rituals. I'm familiar with that. Are we getting drunk in this game?" she asked.

I got the distinct feeling that she was actually toying with me, pulling my leg, engaging in some sort of extraterrestrial humor, but I was not going to be deterred.

"No, we're drinking ginger ale, okay?"

"Good. We don't use drugs," she said. "They impair and dull the senses, and we believe that we can't experience the full exhilaration of life in that state."

"Great. Hi, I'm Phil. What's your name?" I asked.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Gina. What's your sign?"

"Very good," I replied. "You really are familiar with this game. Now that we have been introduced, I want to learn everything I can about you. Where you were born, what your childhood was like, what your interests are, what your home life was like, what your occupation is. I want to know about your friends, your parents, your hopes, and your dreams for the future," I said.

"Oh, I understand," Gina replied. "Why didn't you just say so? I like this game."

She told me that she was born on one of the Verdants' colonized planets in the Milky Way Galaxy approximately 800 Earth years ago. The planet's name cannot be translated into English simply because there is no counterpart word in our language for it. If I had to take a stab at spelling it according to the sound I heard when she pronounced it, it would be something like *Hoksperlmizache*. That is only an approximation, however, because some of the sounds in their speech can't be duplicated by human vocal cords, and, thus, there is no way to spell them.

That is, how does one spell the sound that a human makes when he is gagging, giggling, and hiccuping at the same time? It can't be done.

Surprisingly, there are great similarities between the Verdant culture/social structure and Earth's. All Verdant children attend what (on Earth) would be equivalent to public school, although for a much longer period of time because they do not reach adulthood until they are approximately 60 Earth years of age. Remember that the Verdant year is about three Earth years long, or approximately 1,000 Earth days.

Even on the colonized planets, time is measured in standard Verdant terms despite the fact that the length of the days and years on the manifold worlds vary widely. Some have years that are equal to four or five Earth years, while others are as short as several Earth months. The length of the days are as equally varied.

After reaching adulthood, education continues for every person at what would be considered the university level on Earth. Typically, this would amount to about another 20 Earth years. But because the Verdants do not sleep as we know it, but rather simply

take rest and relaxation periods, life is bustling every hour of the day and night.

A typical human with a university education might have spent six hours a day, 180 days a year for 16 years in class, or about 17,000 hours total. A Verdant attending school 15 hours a day, 300 days a year for somewhere between 50 and 60 years would spend perhaps 250,000 hours in class. Consequently, a Verdant university education would equal perhaps 15 university educations on Earth.

"That sounds so oppressive," I said.

"On the contrary, our love of learning is so great that every moment is exhilarating. We can't get enough of it," she said. "But eventually, our course of formal study comes to an end, and then we have to go out into the world—to put it in terms familiar to you—to take our place in society. Of course, study and learning are lifelong pursuits for us, and the universe then becomes our educational laboratory after our formal classroom instruction is complete."

"But don't you take time to play as children?" I asked.

"We do, just like normal children everywhere," Gina explained. "Believe it or not, childish play is a universal characteristic. There are few sentient animals that we are aware of that don't engage in play. Did you ever observe a litter of your Earth puppies, or tiny lion cubs in a jungle nest? Or how about a family of baby monkeys? Play is a necessary ingredient of learning, of growing up."

Gina was raised in a large city in a family unit that consisted of her and her two parents. There are, of course, no brothers and sisters because of the inability of females to produce more than one offspring in their lifetimes. They also have no institution equivalent to the human state of marriage.

Typically, most Verdants have multiple partners during their extensive lifetimes, with pairings lasting anywhere from 10 to 500 years. Once a child is conceived in any union, however, no matter how long the parents have been together, a family unit has been formed and will not be dissolved before the child leaves the home. That would be a minimum of 50 to 60 years, when the child has reached the age of early adulthood and has completed its course of formal education.

Often, depending upon the circumstances, the child might stay in the family home for up to 100 years. Eventually, though, the adult children themselves pair up with chosen partners and leave the parents' home.

"But no marriage?" I asked.

"No, just a spiritual bonding," she replied.

"And then you begin your own families?" I asked.

"Rarely do first pairings result in a child," she answered. "We simply pair up and share our lives for a period of time. At some point, by mutual agreement, we each choose another partner and proceed to a new level in our lives. It is all a very rewarding and satisfactory arrangement. It keeps life interesting."

"Do you fall out of love, then, when you decide to move on to a new mate?" I inquired.

"It's impossible to fall *out* of love because we don't fall *in* love," she said.

This was disturbing to me for some reason. I tried to analyze it, to try to put my finger on the feeling of uneasiness I experienced upon hearing this statement. And then it hit me. The arrangement she was describing struck me as the simple mating of two barnyard animals, a carnal union driven by instinct and devoid of the human qualities of caring, compassion, and tenderness—in other words, the ingredients of love. I expected so much more from these creatures of such advancement—a more noble quality of spirit.

"You pair up just for sex, without love?" I asked, barely hiding my disappointment.

"Oh, I see what you are saying," she said. "My goodness, no. Of course not. Do you remember the first time you fell in love, as you humans term it?"

I said I did. I don't think anybody ever really forgets that singular event in their lives.

She asked me to describe my feelings at the time.

It was a tough question. I made several faltering attempts to answer. Finally, I told her that I didn't think the feelings could be translated into words. She pressed me to try. I put aside all of the thoughts about the first kiss, the fluttering heart when taking the beloved's hand for the first time. I looked at the bigger picture.

"Happy," I said. "No, more than that. Deliriously happy. Enraptured. Walking on air."

"What did she look like?" Gina asked.

She was wonderful, I told her. But for the life of me I really couldn't visualize her face. Nor, for that matter, could I even remember if she was pretty or plain, intelligent or dull, overweight, underweight, or average weight.

"You don't remember because it's not the person who stirs the cherished memories; it's the event itself," she said. "The love is the experience; the girl could have been any one of a million others. You would still carry the fond memories no matter who the girl was."

The human brain, she said, stores billions of bits of information that define a lifetime of experience. But only the momentous events, the ones that stand apart from the mundane, everyday occurrences, are easily recalled. She said that may be because these milestone markers are the ones that most critically influence the development of the person, the way the person views life. Whether they strike chords of joy or sorrow, fear or confidence, anticipation or dread, celebration or mourning, they stand the test of time by remaining keenly vivid.

I think she was giving me a lesson in life, and I must admit that she may have something there. I thought about some of the key incidents in my life that so easily spring to mind with no effort, even decades later. That would include my induction into the Army as a 19-year-old draftee (apprehension), my graduation from college (gratitude), my first job (excitement), the birth of my daughter (bliss), and the day she left home for college (pride combined with a broken heart).

I admitted to Gina that she was indeed right. I was long on the memories of the emotions and stirrings I felt for my first love, but short on the details of the girl herself.

"Just imagine that you felt the same way about every person on Earth," Gina said. "We do not fall in love—because we love all of our people uncompromisingly, every individual one, all the trillions of strangers. We adore one another, but on what you would consider a platonic level, without the sexual element. Only when the male and female pair up does the additional element of sex enter the relationship."

"Then why do your couples break up?" I asked. "I'm confused."

"I'm not sure you will ever understand," she said. "But it's because love and sex are not intertwined for us as they are in human romantic relationships. Our love for one another never wanes, even as we move on to other partners. But we simply move on sexually when the physical union begins to lose its intensity, much as you might move on to a different job when your current one does not provide you with the same satisfaction and rewards that it originally did. I cannot explain it in any simpler terms."

Well, I still wasn't sure that I understood, but I let the subject lie. Obviously, we were having a culture clash of sorts.

Anyway, Gina left her parents' home at about 90 years of age, again in Earth terms, and held a variety of jobs in both government and private industry over the next several hundred years. In that time, she had paired up with about 20 different males, with the relationships lasting for as little as 10 years to as much as 75 years.

Once, when she was about 400 years old, she joined the crew of an ore ship that mined asteroids for precious metals that were used primarily to construct the great ships of the Verdant empire. She retired from that job after about 35 years and settled on the home planet of Verdant to continue her studies, concentrating on foreign languages. After becoming proficient in every known language and dialect in the universe, well over 30,000, she signed on as a linguist on a star cruiser assigned to explore a quadrant of the Andromeda Galaxy.

During her tour of duty, the ship discovered two planets inhabited by intelligent beings. Both races are still in the preliminary stages of development, however, although they do have organized civilizations and are still thousands of years away from evolving to the level of potential star travelers. After that, she was assigned to the Goodwill about 60 years ago as part of the team observing Earth.

"And that's the story of my life in a nutshell," she said.

And what a life it has been.

Chapter Thirteen

Duty Roster

After eight hours of sleep and another hour of eating, bathing, and grooming, I was back in the boardroom. At roughly hour number 53 or 54, it would be somewhere between 7 and 9 o'clock in the morning of Friday, June 13, at home. I wondered if my wife had been calling the house. I longed to be with her. I'm sure the incident with Gina the night before contributed to my emotional state.

After the report that I was supposed to write was published, I was reminded, the Ambassadors who had been chosen to serve as liaisons between our two peoples would begin preparations to carry out their assignments on prearranged cues. Each step in the campaign that would ultimately lead up to a summit meeting between representatives of the two species would be built upon a previous event or events.

The process would start slowly at first, beginning with the white paper, and grow exponentially in carefully planned and controlled stages until the total framework was in place. Somewhere along the line, one or more Ambassadors would supply the leaders of the major governments of Earth with advance information on the exact time, date, and place that a certain prodigious event would occur.

This spectacle would be of such monumental proportions, beyond the pale of any Earth society to execute, that no intelligent, reasonable leader would be able to doubt the authenticity of its extraterrestrial origins. And then in rapid succession, several other similarly dazzling phenomena would take place to erase any possible lingering doubts. Government leaders would be given advance notice of these milestones by the

Ambassadors, with one important variation—the public would also be informed.

I became momentarily alarmed and asked, "These won't be destructive, will they?"

Not at all, I was assured. These events would occur close to the end of the campaign, which would be several years down the line, and would be a prelude to the impending summit. Their sole purpose would be to convince any remaining skeptics that imminent contact was an absolute certainty that no rational person could deny. Of course, a lot of groundwork would be laid beforehand by the various Ambassadors as they went about executing their assignments.

When I naively asked about the nature of these planned events, I was informed that I was not authorized to know. Only those Ambassadors who had been assigned to deliver the message had a need to be informed. With their superior credibility, they would be much more convincing messengers.

Any such message from me would fall upon deaf ears, they admitted. So even if the planned event did take place, mine would be just another voice crying out in the wilderness of chaos that would naturally follow. I wouldn't be heard in the tumult, and the significance of the event would be lost.

Once the Ambassadors, relying heavily upon their own extensive credibility, had sufficiently influenced public opinion, certain select individuals would deliver to the world's leaders the details on making arrangements for the summit conference—and actual contact. The purpose of the contact would be to lay out the ground rules and the conditions for smoothing the path for man's eventual climb into the stars as members of the interstellar community.

The name of the planetary alliance, as mentioned earlier, translates into English as the Intergalactic Federation of Sovereign Planets. Of course, the Americans will know it by one name, the French by another, the Iranians by another, and so forth, but it will mean essentially the same thing in all languages and dialects.

Without the assistance of the Verdants, humans would not be true star chasers for another 400 to 500 years, according to the best estimates of the extraterrestrials' scientists. However, if all goes according to plan, the intervention by the Verdants will

speed up that transition, sharing technology and becoming a mentor to humankind, so that the first major steps will be taken early in the 21st century, perhaps even before the end of the first decade if all goes according to the established timetable.

That does not just mean building a space platform or a crude moon colony or even sending astronauts on a mission to Mars. It means that human men and women will be routinely traveling to other solar systems within the galaxy. The Milky Way Galaxy, home to the Earth and its neighboring planets, stretches 100,000 light-years across. That's not miles, that's light-years—600,000 trillion miles or thereabouts.

And that's just across our own little galaxy. There are billions of galaxies waiting out there for humankind.

"I assume that this summit conference will take place on Earth," I said, "since the mountain doesn't have the capabilities to go to Mohammed."

The Verdants understood the literary allusion without any difficulty, and they confirmed that my assumption was a correct one. When I asked the location of the planned meeting, they told me that when the time comes, it will become quite obvious where it will take place.

Once all remaining skepticism among the rational inhabitants of Earth has been eliminated, when it becomes an accepted fact among the world's population that contact is imminent, the location will be revealed in quite dramatic fashion, I was told.

Because the Earth's population will already have been converted into believers and will be in the final stages of preparing a welcome for the visitors, there is no need for secrecy regarding this matter.

That said, I can reveal that the visitors plan to transform a 600-square-mile area of arid wasteland somewhere in the American Southwest into a green grassland overnight.

Shortly thereafter, a vast structural complex will appear in the converted grasslands where the emissaries of all the nations on Earth and the delegates of the star travelers will meet. The compound will contain living quarters, recreation areas, meeting rooms, educational laboratories, public schools for the children of human inhabitants, libraries, a university, a landing site for alien shuttle craft, a traditional international airport,

commercial establishments, maintenance facilities, and a government center. No need will go unmet. It will be a small self-contained city unto itself and will be named "Genesis."

After formal introductions and opening ceremonies, the representatives of both worlds will interact in both business and social settings to get to know each other. This phase should last approximately a week. After that, the heads of government will return to their duties in their respective capitals while their hand-picked emissaries will stay behind to continue negotiations and planning. The total process will take about a year to complete, I was told.

As the temporary residents depart, permanent residents will take their place, and Genesis will continue to function as a modern international city. The newly created United Governments of Earth will be the primary employer.

Once it is determined that the Earth is ready, each government will select a number of volunteer representatives from every imaginable field of human endeavor—scientists, teachers, pilots, artists, philosophers, historians, astronomers, engineers, doctors, bankers, industrialists, lawyers, journalists, ad infinitum—to participate in an intensive POEI program.

They will live in Genesis for the duration of the program, which will last for one to three years, depending upon their specialties and their field of study. They will board a shuttle craft each morning, Monday through Friday, to be transported to their classrooms aboard the Goodwill, and will be returned to the Genesis space port each evening.

Some of the subjects they will study—again, depending upon their fields of specialization—will be Verdant history, Verdant anatomy, structure of the interplanetary federation (IFSP), and universal geography. They will also study astral philosophy, the laws governing interstellar travel.

These are the people who will lead the human species through the transition from isolated Earthlings to members of the intergalactic community of star travelers.

Chapter Fourteen

The Face of God

During this final session, we took a long break after about five or six hours—well, at least *I* took a break; I didn't know what the cosmic visitors did during these periods since they don't sleep. I was approaching hour 60 aboard ship. It probably was somewhere about noon on Friday, June 13, 1997, at home.

I was served the usual sumptuous buffet back in my quarters, in the company of Gina. We chatted for a couple of hours about our personal lives, although she avoided any further questions concerning human sexual habits.

If she were a young lady whom I had met at home, I would come to like her as a sweet, charming, kind, gentle person. She was a mere 800 years old, give or take 20 or 30 years, and had been aboard this ship for about 60 years. She had not yet given birth to the one child that all females of her species are capable of producing, and she said she probably would not do so until she was at least 1,000 years old.

She enjoyed the life of space traveler but also looked forward to the day when she would settle down on either her home planet or one of the colonized ones and spend the rest of her life in meaningful pursuits there. Like all individuals among her species, she had an instinctive thirst for knowledge and would devote a large part of her life to study. As mentioned previously, learning provided the Verdants with the greatest pleasure, and they all, without exception, pursued that quest throughout their lifetimes.

Almost every individual also spends a small portion of his or her life in some capacity as a space traveler. The lure is simply too intriguing to resist for a species that possesses

such an appetite for knowledge. But once they satisfy that yearning, most individuals are content to live out their lives on solid ground. There are professionals, of course, who spend half of their lifetimes—something like 10,000 years—in space, but the vast majority of Verdants are satisfied with a term of 100 to 300 years.

In response to her questions, I told Gina about my life at home, touching on my place of birth, my childhood, and my career.

"We don't have the same luxury of time that you have," I said, pointing out that at 62, most of my life had already been lived, while hers had hardly begun at 800 years.

"Oh, I don't think the difference in our life spans is all that important on this plane," she said. "After all, it's almost meaningless at the transitory level."

I eyed her curiously, and I thought I saw a look of pure innocence on her face. Was I learning to recognize almost imperceptible nuances in her features, ever-so-slight facial expressions? Perhaps.

"I'm not sure I understand," I said. "No, I'm sure I don't understand. I have no idea what you mean."

"Our life spans," she replied. "We both know they are exactly the same in the larger picture despite the differences in the temporal stage. Quite frankly, I don't see the distinction you are trying to make."

"And I still don't know what you are talking about," I said. But deep down I felt a stirring that made me think that maybe I understood more than I realized, and my breath became a bit shallower.

And then she said something that stunned and overwhelmed me, that caused my heart to slam against my chest, that momentarily paralyzed my respiration.

"Our souls," she said almost as though talking to a child. "Our immortal souls."

My vision wavered, my breath came in gasps, my hands and forehead broke out in sweat, and I momentarily thought that I was going to pass out. If I was correctly assessing the full import of her words, she had just uttered the most astounding revelation in the history of all humankind.

"Are you all right?" she asked, and I saw—this time there was no mistake—I actually

saw emotion on her face, and it was a look of concern.

"Now I am the one who doesn't understand," she said. "We have studied your species. We know everything there is to know about you. We know about your religions and your belief in God and your awareness of the immortal soul that all of God's children possess. Why should you be alarmed at the mention of this?"

"You believe in God?" I stammered. "In an immortal soul?"

Her face became a canvas of expression. I had broken through. It took a practiced eye, and I would not have seen it only hours before, but I could now read the very, very subtle musculature changes that revealed her emotions.

"Believe?" she asked in wonder. "We don't just *believe*. We *know*. Our scientists proved the existence of the soul millennia ago. Our ships have discovered the precise location of Heaven in the universe. We have been there."

"I am confused by your reaction. Your people worship God. They celebrate the soul."

"But our beliefs are based on faith," I said incredulously. "We believe because it gives us comfort, not because we have any evidence for our beliefs."

After I had taken several deep breaths and calmed down, Gina apologized. She said she hadn't realized that I was one of that small minority of humans who were not absolutely and totally convinced of the existence of God and the soul. She said if she had known, she would not have persisted with the conversation because she was not an authority on theology yet, although someday she would be—like every individual in her species—an authority on everything there is to know.

She rose from her chair and spoke some of that incomprehensible language into a small device that she pulled from a recess in the wall I had never noticed before. Within a minute or two, another star traveler entered the room.

Gina introduced him to me as Jason and said he was a "minister."

"He is in distress," Jason said to Gina. "You have erred, child."

His tone was kindly and gentle, but there was no doubt in my mind that it was a rebuke, however mild. Gina hung her head ever so slightly. Jason had me lie back on the bed, and he laid a hand upon my forehead. A soothing calm enveloped my body. I had

never been more at peace in my life.

Jason explained that millions of years ago their experts established as scientific fact the existence of the immortal soul. That momentous event, of course, changed the entire course of the history of the universe. Subsequent studies of all of the other species that the Verdants have discovered in their exploratory expeditions have proved incontrovertibly that those beings, without exception, also possess an immortal soul.

Even the ferocious species that have been confined to their home planets due to the potential threat they pose to the peace-loving civilizations among the stars are also children of God. They also will be redeemed by God, and their souls will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. And although they must be kept isolated for the time being, eventually they will give up their warlike ways, and when they no longer pose a threat to interstellar peace, they will be welcomed into the federation.

As the federation grew over the millennia and more and more civilizations began sending out expeditions, larger and larger chunks of the universe came under exploration.

And then, in one of the most significant moments in the history of the universe, a Verdant crew on a routine mission of exploration happened upon the actual location of Heaven. It is and forever will be the largest structure in the universe, and its only entrance is through the 12 Gates of Pearl. The giant Verdant ship inexplicably came to a standstill, and no effort to regain movement was successful.

The captain filed an urgent report to the High Command of Verdant and was instructed to take no action, to make no further efforts to free the ship from the forces that held it in check. Soon thereafter, The Supreme Theologian of the IFSP, who also happened to be a native Verdant, was dispatched to the ship, and he was aboard within several Earth days. A welcoming ceremony for such a distinguished visitor was prepared, but The Supreme Theologian waved it off upon coming aboard and went directly to the Meditation Room.

He remained in isolation there for 11 Earth hours before emerging.

"I will go to meet with The Father," he said to the captain, whereupon he departed to

one of the many shuttle craft ports, and, wearing no spacesuit, but merely his robe, stepped out into space. All of the members of the crew of 31,568 gathered around every available viewing port and screen and watched in astonishment as the highest-ranking holy man in the IFSP drifted off and entered through one of the Gates of Pearl.

For the next eight Earth days, hardly a word was spoken aboard the ship as every single occupant put aside his duties and retreated into a state of meditation. At the end of the eighth day, The Supreme Theologian was picked up on view screens emerging through the same gate that he had entered. The air lock on the shuttle craft port was opened, and he reboarded the ship.

"We will depart now," he told the captain, and immediately the engines sprang into life and the great ship hurtled off into the blackness. The Supreme Theologian asked to address the crew, and every ear turned its attention to the thousands of intercom speakers throughout the giant ship. He spoke but one word:

"Rejoice."

And then he left the ship by transporter and returned to Verdant.

When the minister paused, I turned to look at him. I waited a few seconds and then determined that he had finished his narrative.

"But what happened?" I asked. "What went on behind the gates?"

"A Father and son met and talked," the minister said.

"He talked with God?" I asked incredulously. "But I thought that only spirits go to Heaven, after they have departed the mortal body," I said.

"It has always been that way," the minister replied. "But God can make exceptions. He is, after all, The Father."

Chapter Fifteen

Welcome Back

The session with Gina and Jason had lasted about four or five hours, which meant it was about five in the afternoon on Friday, June 13, at home, when Gina escorted me back to the boardroom. Roughly 64 or 65 hours had elapsed since I came aboard. During the next six hours, the Verdants basically tied up loose ends.

I had to constantly shake myself out of reverie to concentrate on the matters under discussion because my attention kept straying as I dwelled on the mind-boggling revelations of my session with Jason.

Gradually, the meeting wore down. I could have asked a million more questions, but they involved matters of mere schoolboy curiosity on my part, and the Verdants gave the impression that they had exhausted the store of information that they wanted me to have.

Silently, a crew member entered the room and strode up to Gus. I think he may have given Gus a salute of some sort, and then he laid a bound ledger upon the table. He retreated without word or sound. Gus picked up the book, studied it for a moment, and passed it down the table to me. I opened it and realized it was the roster of Ambassadors and Deputy Envoys. There were hundreds of names that ran for page after page. A short biographical blurb and a small color photograph accompanied each name.

The text was in English, but a majority of the names carried foreign—that is, outside of the United States—addresses. It seemed that every identifiable race and ethnic group was represented. I recognized a few faces, and many more names. And, sure enough,

pictured prominently was a key management figure at the *Los Angeles Times* whom I know personally. I was sure that this was the person who had recommended me to write the white paper.

In those cases where I wasn't familiar with either name or face, I certainly recognized the titles the individuals bore or the national and international companies, organizations, and private and government agencies that they represented.

It was an abbreviated Who's Who of the World, and it was most impressive. All of these people were Ambassadors, of course. I didn't recognize any of the Deputy Envoys. I took my time studying the book, because if I was going to have total recall upon my return, I wanted to log every entry into my memory bank.

The Verdants sat patiently as I went through the book from cover to cover, taking nearly an hour to do so. Finally, I closed the book and slid it to the one seated next to me, who passed it back to Gus.

"I believe our business is concluded," Gus said. All eyes turned to him. He looked down the length of the table and focused his eyes upon me. "You will be going home now, my friend."

That was the first time since I had come aboard that I had been addressed in an endearing term. And then I realized that not once during that time had the Verdants even addressed me by name or courtesy title. They simply had spoken to me without ever resorting to either formal or informal introductory address.

"Tell this to the people of Earth," Gus continued. "We come to you as the shepherd comes to the lamb. We know the way, and we will guide your step. We have discovered the light, and we will shine it upon your path.

"Space is a house of peace, and we welcome your people. Go into the dawn of this new day without fear or trepidation, but rather with high spirits and a thankful heart.

"Mankind is on the threshold of rebirth."

I spent another hour with Gina in the observation bubble. I couldn't bring myself to leave the ship without revisiting that wondrous place. I wanted to burn the sight of the sparkling universe into my brain. I did not know if destiny would lead me this way again.

If not, I would have my memories, even without the aid of the temporary total recall that I would be granted.

I wanted the grandeur of the sight to remain with me until my dying day.

"It's time," Gina said. She ushered me back into the "elevator," and we retraced our path for a while and then veered off in another direction. We came to a room about one-quarter the size of the one in which I initially found myself when I was first brought aboard the ship.

There was a beehive of activity occurring throughout, as perhaps 100 or so Verdants went about whatever business they were up to. We stepped to an enclave that contained the familiar disks attached to the ceiling on swivels. Gina made some beckoning motions with her hands, and three Verdants approached. Quickly they slipped the robe and slippers off me, leaving me standing there in my underwear, and positioned me on a pad beneath one of the disks.

A crew member operating a console made a few quick hand movements over the controls, and the disk began glowing, bathing me in the now-familiar bluish-white light. The light pulsated, narrowing into a beam that held me in tight focus. There was the momentary feeling of the pea in the straw again.

It was approximately 2:30 in the morning on Saturday, June 14, 1997. I awoke at 6:30 A.M. and checked the answering machine. There were three messages, all from my wife, who was still staying with her ailing mother. I called her.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"I was out of town for a few days," I replied.

Epilogue

Much to my amazement, my life has not been transformed since the early summer of 1997. It seems inconceivable that a person could go through such an experience and not come out of it a totally different person. There have been changes, of course, but I suppose they are more internal than external, and thus less obvious to those around me.

My daily routine remains pretty much the same as it was before that momentous week in June. I still have to drag myself away from my books and computer to get out and cut the lawn every week and to take the trash barrels out to the curb. I still do the grocery shopping, read my daily newspaper, watch a little TV, and sneak in some occasional time for a nap.

There is no doubt that my outlook on life has taken on new dimensions, but nothing of a radical nature has occurred. What is going to be, will be, and I will simply accept it as it comes.

Perhaps I speak a little more softly these days, am less inclined to react to petty annoyances that might once have elicited a muttered curse word. I still don't like it when someone cuts me off in traffic, but it's easier these days for me to simply shake my head in quiet displeasure, rather than angrily glare at the offender.

I am more tolerant of people who strike me as rude, and less judgmental of those who behave stupidly. I am more prone to throwing my arms around my wife in spontaneous hugs.

But what really nags at the core of my being is my own previous hubris concerning my views on God and religion. The truth of the matter is that I was, for all of my adult life, first an agnostic, and in later years, an outright atheist.

Like the one errant soldier in the marching parade who, in arrogant blindness, believes that everyone else is out of step, I was convinced that the 90 percent or so of

humans who profess a belief in God were misguided, and that I alone was marching in step.

The Verdants, albeit inadvertently, showed me how abysmally wrong I was. I have not however, become a religious zealot or convert. I have simply been humbled. I have never read the Bible or ever willingly attended church services except for weddings and funerals, and this I have done with reluctance.

I don't anticipate any radical changes in that department because I have no idea which human religion to embrace. I suspect that all of them have validity if they preach love and fellowship. I am burning with additional theological questions that I desperately want to ask the Verdants. Due to my limited time aboard, I simply did not have the opportunity to pursue this subject in great depth. But I yearn for knowledge, for answers.

Is there a true universal religion? Did the Supreme Theologian who met with God indicate what life in Heaven is like? How many souls repose in that spiritual sanctuary? Does the soul last for eternity, or is there an eventual end? Will the universe itself cease to exist at some point? Are people reunited with loved ones in Heaven? What form does the Verdant religion take? Is it possible for a mortal being to physically visit a departed soul in Heaven?

These are questions that cannot be answered definitively, as far as I am aware, by Earthly religions whose structure is based on pure faith rather than hard facts. And in these matters, the extraterrestrials have the edge.

Humankind has faith. Extraterrestrials have evidence.

If wishes are granted, I will return to the Goodwill in the near future to ask my questions, unless the Verdants get here sooner than planned.

*** **

About the Author

Phillip H. Krapf spent 30 years in the newspaper business as a reporter, photographer, editor, and editorial writer. He worked for 25 years as an editor on the Metro copy desk of the *Los Angeles Times*, in the downtown L.A. newsroom.

During that time, he shared in a Pulitzer Prize as a member of the Metro team that won the award for the newspaper's coverage of the Los Angeles riots in 1992. Krapf took early retirement in 1993 at the age of 58.

Prior to joining the *Times* staff in 1968, Krapf spent the first five years of his journalism career, after graduating from college in 1963, as a staff member of a community newspaper in San Fernando, California.

He began as a cub reporter and eventually was promoted to managing editor of the newspaper. During that time, he was awarded several writing awards by the San Fernando Valley Press Club for news, features, and editorials. In 1966, he was named Journalism Alumnus of the Year by the Cal State Northridge chapter of Sigma Delta Chi, a professional journalism society.

Krapf has remained active in retirement as a freelance writer. He lives with his wife of 31 years, Maria, in Southern California.

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